A Tarantino Collection

A collection of film reviews and other writings by Quentin Tarantino between 1982 and 2022, found online -- mostly from the New Beverly Cinema website, and an archive of that site at Archive.org. Tarantino had no input in the collection of these writings.

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Gunsmoke: Vengeance Part 1 & Part 2 (1967)

Gunsmoke was one of the most popular shows on CBS. But by the late sixties the star of Gunsmoke, James Arness, tried to appear on the show as little as possible. Even though by this time Arness only made guest appearances on his own series, the show was such a staple of the network it never affected viewership. So CBS let him get away with it. But one of the things that allowed CBS to do was build episodes around exciting name guest stars, and young exciting talent the network was possibly grooming for a show of their own. And if those promising young actors scored on their Gunsmoke, they were pretty much guaranteed a show of their own on the next CBS schedule. And future *Lancer* star James Stacy scored one of the best episodes in the entire run of the series. Which since Gunsmoke was one of the high quality shows of its day, is saying something.

This episode from the thirteenth season was entitled *Vengeance Part 1*. It was written by Calvin Clements Sr., one of the great TV western episodic writers of his time.And directed by Richard C. Sarafian a talented episodic TV director just before he made the leap to feature films with seventies cult classics like *Vanishing Point* & *Man In The Wilderness* (Barry Newman has become iconic as the Dodge Challenger driver Kowalski, with his button down white shirt opened up at the chest, and his curly white man-fro. But James Stacy would have been both way sexier and way cooler as Kowalski). *Vengeance* was a two part episode that along with Stacy guest starred John Ireland, Morgan Woodward, Buck Taylor (just before he'd join the show as Matt Dillon's deputy Newly O'Brian), and Kim Darby one year before True Grit.

Stacy plays Bob Johnson, who along with his older brother Zack (Morgan Woodward) and his foster father figure Hiller (James Anderson) are saddle bums riding the range. They come across a wounded calf. One of the unwritten laws of the West was wounded calves are to be slaughtered so they don't draw wolves to the herd. So as the three saddle tramps are slaughtering the calf, and preparing to enjoy themselves a free steak dinner, the small time cattle baron Parker (John Ireland), whose calf that was and whose land they're on, rides up with his sons, his ranch hands, and his puppet sheriff (Paul Fix) in tow. The Johnson Brothers try to explain the situation. But Parker won't listen to them, and deems them cattle rustlers. They shoot Hiller dead, shoot Zack paralyzing him, and shoot Bob wounding him and leave him for dead. With Paul Fix's bought and paid for sheriff officiating over the execution making it all legal as pie (a bloodthirsty *Oxbow Incident*). Bob survives and gets his brother to the nearby town of Dodge, where series star U.S. Marshal Matt Dillon (James Arness) presides. Marshal Dillon

informs Bob that wealthy mean bastard Parker runs his own town, Parkertown, that was meant to rival Dodge as a municipality.

But where Dodge grew and became a stagecoach stop, Parkertown remained a one dog town run by a family of Wild West Borgias that people just rode through on their way someplace else. Marshal Dillon believes the Johnson Brothers and knows full well that Parker is a bitter bastard completely capable of doing what Bob claims.The fact remains they were on Parker's land. And even though Paul Fix's sheriff of Parkertown, who presided over the execution, is a weak-willed puppet who does whatever his dictator-like boss tells him to, he is the legal lawman of Parkertown. And unfair as it is, the execution was legal. Marshal Dillon instructs Bob and Zack to sit tight in Dodge and heal up from their wounds, and let Doc (Milburn Stone) care for his bedridden brother.

But what nobody in either Dodge or Parkertown knows is Bob Johnson possesses a lightning fast gun hand. And while Bob knows he can't just go out and kill Parker or his sons without swinging at the end of a rope for it, he also knows Parker's hot headed son Leonard (Buck Taylor) has no idea how fast a draw Bob is. So Bob lures Leonard to town, and gets him to draw on him in the middle of Dodge surrounded by witnesses, legally shooting him dead in the street. Naturally Parker and his boys ride into Dodge, loaded for bear, and demanding retribution. Marshal Dillon informs the bloodthirsty low rent cattle baron what's good for the goose is good for the gander. While legally he couldn't interfere with the initial murder over the calf, because it took place on Parker's land, neither can he interfere in this murder, because Bob has half the town as witnesses that he was defending himself. Nevertheless Matt knows full well Bob orchestrated the whole damn incident. And Marshal Dillon doesn't appreciate saddle tramps coming into his town, and turning his main drag into a killing ground for their own private vendetta. So he informs Bob that as soon as his brother is well enough to travel, he wants them the fuck outta' Dodge. Unfortunately Bob's brother Zack will never leave Dodge. Because Parker sends an assassin in the night to murder Bob's bedridden brother. While everybody knows Parker is responsible, proving it is another matter.

Another story line the episode includes is Bob's burgeoning romance with an innocent young Dodge City girl played by Kim Darby. On the show Darby plays a sweet girl who falls in love with the troubled rascal Bob. And while filming the episode, sweet girl Kim Darby, fell in love with the rascal James Stacy. The two were married after filming and divorced shortly afterwards.

So when Bob is fit to travel he climbs atop his horse fixing to leave Dodge City and the territory. When he first entered the territory, he was a happy go lucky one of three. Now with the two men who represented his family dead and buried in the ground, he leaves the territory, alone, bitter, and Parker bloodthirsty. Marshal Dillon warns him to steer clear of Parkertown, put this behind him, and live a good life somewhere like Zack and Hiller would want. However before Bob can leave, the puppet sheriff of Parkertown rides into Dodge and passes on a message to Bob. He tells him he's quit his position as sheriff, so for the time being there is no law in Parkertown. The Sheriff also informs Bob it was Parker who had his brother killed, and that's why he's quit and leaving. But he has one last errand to run for his bastard boss.

An invitation, a challenge and a dare to ride into Parkertown and face Parker and his men.

And as *Vengeance Part 1* comes to a close, we witness Bob (all alone) riding into the shithole known as Parkertown, with Parker and all of men waiting for him.

Wow! What a cliffhanger!

When *Vengeance Part 2* starts, also written by Clements and directed by Sarafian, it picks up right where Part 1 left off. And what follows is one of the best done shootouts I've ever seen in a sixties western television show. And you don't have to wait, it just happens – Bam – right off the bat. The beginning of Part 2 feels like the exciting and satisfying climax of a damn fine seventies revenge western, not a Gunsmoke episode.

As far as the rest of Part 2 is concerned, I will say the remaining part of the show isn't anywhere near as good as the opening scene. And if you're familiar with the structure of Gunsmoke, it's pretty obvious how the show must end. And that part is a big drag. But James Stacy is fantastic in this story. I'm sure every sexy young swingin' dick in town, not already on a series, or starring in feature films wanted the part of Bob Johnson. David Carradine, Michael Parks, Tom Laughlin and Robert Blake would have all been terrific in the part as well. But once you see it, it's hard to imagine anybody else other than Stacy in the part.

The next year Stacy would do another hot damn guest star gig on Stuart Whitman's amazingly good ninety minute CBS western series Cimarron Strip (the show only lasted a season, but ever single episode played like a terrific western feature film).

Stacy's episode titled, *The Judgement*, confirmed his star potential was no joke. And that same year his show Lancer went on the air on CBS.

While *Lancer* was a good show, and Stacy's slightly anti-hero character of Johnny Lancer/Johnny Madrid always remained recklessly roguish, once it went to a weekly series he was never the volcanically violent shady ass son-of-a-bitch he was on the pilot. Stacy might have worn the costume of Johnny Madrid, but he was pretty much reduced to a puppy dog who momentarily misbehaves. But on the *Vengeance* episode, Bob Johnson never has to reform or conform. And we the audience are on Bob's side all the way down the line. Including when he goes up against Arness' Matt Dillon.

Targets (1968)

One of the coolest aspects of Roger Corman's legendary legacy, is the unique, capitalist in nature, *investments/experiments,* he'd assign to his young protégés. Corman felt if he was flying to a location to make one of his movies that offered unique visual opportunities (as opposed to most of his other movies that he just shot all around Los Angeles or Bronson Canyon), the most expensive part of the expenditure, was the airplane tickets to get the cast and the crew to these locations.So if the locations are striking enough to fly there in the first place, *why not make two movies?* One shot by him, and another one done on the cheap by one of his *protégés*, with a few actors left over from the earlier production. This is how Corman's *dry* WW2 adventure, *Ski Troop Attack,* shot on the snowy mountains of Northwood South Dakota, begat *Monte Hellman's hip Beast of the Haunted Cave.* Or how his racing car flick *The Young Racers,* which finished its European tour shoot in Ireland, begat *Francis Ford Coppola's Dementia 13.*

He'd also come up with tricky puzzles that young filmmakers had to figure out how to solve. Like make one movie with one filmmaker and release it. Then take *another* filmmaker, and tell them to remove twenty or thirty minutes out of the first picture. Shoot twenty or thirty minutes worth of new footage that changes the plot, slap a new title on it, and release it as a *new movie.* That's how *Jack Hill's Blood Bath,* became *Stephanie Rothman's Track of the Vampire.* How *Oscar Williams' 1972 Billy Dee Williams* independent feature, *The Final Comedown,* became 1976's *Billy Dee Williams* Blaxploitation flick *Blast! (with footage reshot by Allan Arkush).* How *Charles B. Griffith's* 1976 car chase hit *Eat My Dust starring Ron Howard,* became *Charles B. Griffith's 1981's* car chase comedy *Smokey Bites The Dust starring Jimmy McNichol.*

Corman continued with these cannibalized experiments into the nineties. But of all the *tricky Corman puzzles* that Roger produced, *Peter Bogdanovich's Targets* is the class act. But I'm sure at the time, Roger's initial proposal probably didn't seem so promising to the young filmmaker (the film was written and directed by Bogdanovich, and conceived by Peter and his then wife *Polly Platt). The deal* that Roger offered Peter and Polly was *horror film icon Boris Karloff* owed Corman two days work. So Peter was to take one of the Karloff films that Corman owned, the terrible *The Terror,* and appropriate twenty minutes of Karloff footage out of it. Come up with a new story and shoot twenty minutes of footage during a two day shoot with Karloff. Then forty minutes of footage with other actors, and *voilà…a new Boris Karloff horror title!*

Now this *Corman Puzzle* had a few hard to rectify pieces. First, any movie that *must* incorporate twenty minutes from *The Terror,* is practically *doomed on arrival.* Second, if you *must* use that much footage from *The Terror,* you sorta' hafta' make a gothic horror film. Well by 1968 gothic horror films just didn't seem to work anymore.In the *Summer of Love* they seemed old fashioned to the point of camp. And most importantly, they weren't scary. Even the reigning horror star of that time *Vincent Price* didn't make them anymore. Instead focusing on crueler visions like *Michael Reeves Witchfinder General,* and its de facto sequel *Cry of the Banshee,* or the hip Art Deco decor of *Robert Fuest's The Abominable Dr. Phibes.* Even when Price dipped his beak back in the *Edgar Allan Poe* pond, it wasn't Corman's strategically set bound affairs. It was *Gordon Hessler's* much rougher and more *potent The Oblong Box.*

But the third undesirable item was *Karloff himself.* Actually *Boris Karloff* had entered the sixties quite strong. He was easily one of the most recognizable voices and faces on television from the golden age of Hollywood still making movies. His old horror films were enormously popular on local television stations, both his *Universal classics,* and his more mediocre *Columbia horror titles.* But that would also include his *Abbott & Costello movies, his Charlie Chan movie, his Fu Manchu movies, his Mr. Wong movies, etc.* And for an old man deep in his seventies, Karloff acquitted himself with dignity and class in many sixties projects.

had his anthology TV series *Thriller,* as well as a *Gold Key Thriller comic book and another Gold Key comic book called Boris Karloff Tales of Mystery,* that was in print years after his death. He played supporting roles in some studio productions, he's *heartbreaking* at the end of *MGM's spy drama The Venetian Affair with Robert Vaughn.*

And he's doubly heartbreaking in what I think before *Targets*, and along with *Mario Bava's Black Sabbath,* his greatest performance of the decade, his guest star role on the spy show *I, Spy with Robert Culp and Bill Cosby* in an episode titled *Mainly on the Plains.* Where Karloff played a nuclear scientist living in Spain, *Don Ernesto Slivando,* who's developed a technology that can take missiles out of the sky. Naturally both *Kelly & Scotty* want to convince the old man to bring the technology to the United States. The only problem is the old man has developed dementia, and he *thinks* he's *Miguel de Cervantes'* literary heroic fool *Don Quixote.* Watching the great Karloff slashing at the blades of windmills with his walking cane can break your heart in two. It's a tremendous performance and could be the most moving dramatization of de Cervantes myth done in English.

Speaking of spies and secret agents, he also appeared as a *Thrush Agent (*in complete drag) on *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.* as *Mother Muffin (who seems to have quite a crush on Napoleon Solo),* and in brown face as *Maharajah of Rampor Mr. Singh (sic)* on *The Wild Wild West.* And continuing to appear in classy productions for *American International Pictures (Black Sabbath, The Raven, Comedy of Terrors, Die Monster Die and The Ghost in the Invisible Bikini).* And as a child of this time (5-8) along with his Universal horror films, and Abbott and Costello films, and comedies like *The Boogie Man Will Get You if You Don't Watch Out,* I knew him from his magnificent *LP An Evening with Boris Karloff and Friends (I played that 100 times, and can still quote the dialogue included verbatim),* his voice work on the *Dr. Seuss television holiday staple The Grinch Who Stole Christmas and the Rankin-Bass* puppetoon extravaganza *Mad Monster Party!*

However his track record at the time for appearing in *real* horror films was pretty lousy. The only ones that worked were the humorous ones (*The Raven, Mad Monster Party, Ghost in the Invisible Bikini, which he's quite funny in).* But the real horror films, the ones that are *supposed* to be scary, go from mediocre (*Die Monster Die),* to dull (*The Terror),* to abysmal *(Frankenstein* 1970). The last time Karloff had been in both a horror classic, and had been genuinely scary was as *the Russian vampire Gorca in I Wurdalak* section of *Mario Bava's* horror masterpiece *Black Sabbath.* But aside from that, *Karloff* like his surrogate *Byron Orlok* in Bogdanovich's film complains*, "They use to say, Garbo makes you cry, Chaplin makes you laugh, Orlok makes you scream. Now, they call my films camp".* That was Karloff's persona in 1968.

After Peter and Polly screened *The Terror,* the movie they had to use twenty minutes of, they realized how much trouble they were in (while many hands shot footage on *The Terror, Corman, Jack Hill, Monte Hellman, Daniel Haller,* it was *Francis Ford Coppola* at eleven days that shot the most). But the lameness of *The Terror* prompted a discussion between the creative couple, why aren't these old fashioned castle set, candelabra-carrying gothics not scary anymore *(they were also watching a particularly bad one. In Italy something like Castle of Blood, if not scary, was entertaining*)?

The answer Peter and Polly came up with was that the *real life gun violence of political assassination, airplane hijacking, and lunatics with high powered rifles who shoot strangers from roof tops,* have replaced Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Wolfman as the scary figures that kept people from sleeping at night. So with the sniper from the university tower in Austin Texas, Charles Whitman, fresh in their minds, they flipped the script on Corman's tricky puzzle. Fuck the period gothic

castle based idea, set the film in present day swingin' LA. Don't cast Karloff as a sinister Count or Baron, but as what he *was*…a legendary Hollywood movie star who was still alive plugging away in a Hollywood he didn't recognize anymore. And make a *monster movie,* but a *modern monster movie.* A movie where the monster isn't a vampire, or a radioactive freak in a stupid suit, or a witch, or the ghost of Karloff's long dead wife, but a young good looking, crew cut sporting, *Baby Ruth* eating, baby boomer who grew up in a house recognizable to most (*white)* viewers as their own, who watched *Joey Bishop* on TV with his family, and listened to *93 KHJ* on the car radio of his mustang convertible.The *monster* in this monster movie *wasn't* the boy next door. It was the monster *hiding inside* the boy next door. The monster you couldn't detect (except for ever so brief flashes). The monster the boy spent his life camouflaging. The monster that spent its entire life fighting the boy for domination. *Targets* is about what happens when the boy can fight the monster no longer. When the monster wins. When the monster breaks free, takes control, and wrecks bloody havoc on all who cross its path.

Now if that sounds too ambitious for a ten day Corman puzzle…it was. And the cheeky couple knew it. They knew the script they were fashioning wasn't *exactly* what Corman had asked for, and it *definitely* wasn't what he was expecting. But they hoped it would be good enough, and ultimately cheap enough, that Corman *might* finance it anyway.Well the young couple were more perspective to Corman's psych then they could of known at the time. Corman had offered these *investments*/*experiments* to a few different filmmakers over the years, and he'd continue to offer them to many more to come. These other filmmakers usually held to the letter of the law when it came to Corman's requirements. But invariably when the time came to screen for the big man the results of their endeavor, *he usually hated them* (supposedly Corman and Coppola didn't speak for two years after *Dementia 13).*

Forcing Roger to spend even more money (*unforgivable),* whipping them in shape via second unit shoots by others in order the release them (*Jack Hill,* per Roger's request, shot second unit on Coppola's *Dementia 13,* adding an additional axe murder, and that was the end of Hill and Coppola's relationship. Hill collaborated on all of Coppola's early projects). But as capitalistic, as clean cut, and yes, even square as Corman was (*Joe Dante* once told me, "*Roger wasn't hip. But Roger knew who was hip"),* he was a leftist at heart. Roger Corman's philosophy was give me the elements I need to market a commercial picture. And as he saw them, those elements were *action* and *sex* (*Jonathan Demme* recalled Roger would make notes in red pen right on the script, *possible female breast nudity here?).* But if you gave

him *action & sex,* then he wanted…*a slight social statement*...embedded somewhere inside of the movie.

In the nineties Corman would go on talk shows and famously state that he made two hundred movies, and never lost a dime…except once. The *one exception* was an independent feature he financed himself called *The Intruder (aka I Hate Your Guts). The Intruder* (1962) is a dynamite film, done in the style of a *Playhouse 90* drama, about a white racist outside agitator, played ferociously by a young *William Shatner,* who stokes the fires of anti-black rhetoric in a white southern community. Along with *Machine Gun Kelly* it's the best film Corman ever directed.

The script with its incendiary dialogue by *Charles Beaumont* is one hot fuckin' potato. And *Shatner* as the loathsome lead has *never been better.* The film was made because Roger saw the TV reports of what was happening in the south during the civil rights war. He saw the dogs, and the fire hoses, and the ugly white faces screaming, and he wanted to do something about it. And as *Joe Dante* once told me; "*The idea that Roger felt so strongly about a subject he'd spend his own money, without a guaranteed return on his investment, was meaningful. Because that's not something Roger did."*And when he lost that investment he learned his lesson and never did it again.That's when he started burying his *slight social statement* deep inside the marrow of his women in prison movies and dystopian future movies. The plight of the rural poor in *Boxcar Bertha and Big Bad Mama*. The sly social satire that runs throughout *Death Race 2000 (especially the way the government blames everything on the French).*The fact that two years before *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* came out and said there are *illegal lobotomy's* being preformed in American institutions, *Jonathan Demme's* women in prison flick *Caged Heat* had already said it.

But Bogdanovich's *Targets* is the most political movie Corman ever made since *The Intruder.* And forty years later it's still one of the strongest cries for gun control in American cinema.The film isn't a thriller with a social commentary buried inside of it (*the normal Corman model),* it's a social commentary with a thriller buried inside of it.

From 1967 to 1972 four movies came out that dealt with four real life killers. *In Cold Blood (Perry Smith & Dick Hickock), The Boston Strangler (Albert DeSalvo), Targets (surrogate for Charles Whitman), Dirty Harry (surrogate for The Zodiac Killer).* Richard Brooks played such arty games with *In Cold Blood* he sapped the story of its power. And Richard Fleischer with his split screen shenanigans ended up doing the same thing with *The Boston Strangler. Don Siegel* in *Dirty Harry* does

the best job up to that time in dealing with the serial killer phenomena. But he does it by telling his story in service of a police thriller. But Bogdanovich plays the Charles Whitman aspect upfront and center, but the amusing Boris Karloff section saves the film from earnestness.

So when Peter and Polly came back to Corman with a topical torn from the headlines thriller, as opposed to a dull as dishwater castle bound gothic, yet still managed to incorporate Boris Karloff into the proceedings, I suspect the crafty Corman was proud of his husband and wife team. I also suspect the grand star treatment that Karloff is afforded in the film must of warmed Corman's heart to some degree. What drew Roger to Peter in the first place was his tribute-based writings on the old Hollywood masters.And actually watching Karloff, who'd been acting in movies since the silent days, getting such a royal send off at the twilight of his career couldn't help but warm anybody's heart.

As Joe Dante (the true source of information on all things Corman) points out in his *Trailers from Hell* commentary on *Targets,* the other Corman graduates didn't have the benefit of *Sam Fuller* spitballing their climax (it was Fuller who came up with the idea of the sniper's final confrontation with Karloff), or getting script notes from *Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock.* Nevertheless no other director ever solved one of Corman's tricky puzzles so ingeniously (Bogdanovich actually incorporates quite a lot of footage of *The Terror* into his film). But *Targets* is even better than that. It was one of the most powerful films of 1968 and one of the greatest directorial debuts of all time. And I believe the best film ever produced by *Roger Corman.* Actually the *best* film ever produced by Roger Corman is Bogdanovich's eighth film, *Saint Jack.* But that film was done and released as an art film. *Targets* achieves its diamond in the rough status and *still* manages to play its game by Corman's capitalistic rules.

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)

From ‘The Spectator,’ June 2019

The movie that made me consider filmmaking, the movie that showed me how a director does what he does, how a director can control a movie through his camera, is *Once Upon a Time in the West*. It was almost like a film school in a movie. It really illustrated how to make an impact as a filmmaker. How to give your work a signature. I found myself completely fascinated, thinking: 'That's how you do it.' It ended up creating an aesthetic in my mind.

There have only been a few filmmakers who have gone into an old genre and created a new universe out of it. I really like the idea of creating something new out of an old genre. To some degree, Jean-Pierre Melville did it with the French gangster films. But those Italian guys -- Sergio Leone, Sergio Corbucci, Duccio Tessari and Franco Giraldi -- did it best. They mostly started off as critics and worked their way up to screenwriters. And then they became the second unit guys, the guys that deliver the action. You have to go to the French New Wave to find a group of men who loved cinema as much as they did -- except Leone and the others had a thriving film industry they could work their way into.

Leone's movies weren't just influenced by style. There was also a realism to them: those shitty Mexican towns, the little shacks -- a bit bigger to accommodate the camera -- all the plates they put the beans on, the big wooden spoons. The films were so realistic, which had always seemed to be missing in the westerns of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, in the brutality and the different shades of grey and black. Leone found an even darker black and off-white. There is realism in his presentation of the Civil War in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* that was missing from all the Civil War movies that happened before him. Wild and grandiose as it was, there was never a sentimental streak. Every once in a while he would do a sentimental thing like when the Man with No Name would hand a smoke to a dying soldier in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, but that's just about as close to sentimentality as he got.

In the late 1960s, American westerns let the Italians take over because Italian movies weren't tired. They seemed like a response to the westerns that we'd been seeing for ever. The combination of the surreality and the violence. They don't seem that violent now, but they seemed very violent then, because they didn't take it that seriously: Italians laugh at violence, that special type of gallows humour.

And there was the youth and energy. And, by the way, in the Spaghetti westerns, they weren't old and bloated stars. A lot of the heroes were young guys from earlier American western TV series. But they dressed cooler, they acted cooler. They were the perfect thing for the 1960s revolution that was happening at the time.

Designer Carlo Simi is one of the unsung geniuses -- Leone's secret weapon, as much as Ennio Morricone. There was nothing special about the sets and costumes in the American western movies of the late 1960s: the costumes were always from the costume department of whatever studio they were shooting at. Carlo Simi, on the other hand, was creating outfits that have a comic-book panache, sometimes literally -- like one of the three Sergios actually saw a comic book: 'Hey, give them a cape like this.' These crazy costumes can do half the work for the characters, whether that be the bad guys or the heroes or the adventurers. Leone once said they were like suits of armour. They have this pop-cultural zeitgeist to them. The dusters in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, like the trenchcoats in Melville's films, are timeless. With Leone's westerns, you are literally talking about the best production design, the best costume design, and the movies with the best props of all time. There's no equivalent to it.

People sometimes think that Leone was the first Italian to make spaghetti westerns. But of course he wasn't. Sergio Corbucci was doing a spaghetti western in 1964, the same time Leone was doing *Fistful of Dollars*. But he wasn't trying to do something different at that time -- he was actually trying to be more like the American westerns, and this is reflected in the music, which isn't operatic at all. It was Leone who put the music to task and turned it to opera. I know there are examples that will be contrary to what I am saying, but it feels as if Leone is the first guy ever to cut picture to music in that way. Before him it just happened by accident where somebody thought it would be cool for a little sequence, but didn't think they should do it for the rest of the movie. But the way we cut to music now: you pick some rock song and you cut your scene to that song. That all started with Leone and Morricone, and particularly with *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* .

Morricone and Leone affected my films in every way, shape and form. First off, the surf music, Dick Dale, 'Misirlou'. I never understood what surf music had to do with surfing. To me, it always sounded like rock'n'roll spaghetti western music: Morricone music with a guitar-driven beat. I've always said that *Pulp Fiction* was a modern-day spaghetti western. Then I started using bits of music Morricone had written for other movies. Then I worked with him as my composer -- which I'd never done before with anyone. It went from him not getting it, and then him

getting it -- him literally seeing my way -- and then to me working with him on *The Hateful Eight*.

There was very little place for Sergio Leone to go after *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which is why he did this kind of weird disappearing act. But when it comes to *Once Upon a Time in the Wes*t, it's both the end of something and the beginning of something. It is the end of the spaghetti western as we know it. It's the end of this magnificent genre which wasn't given any respect in its time for the most part, even in America and especially Italy. Look at Roger Ebert's and Pauline Kael's reviews of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, and forget about looking up someone like Sergio Corbucci in the New York Times, I mean they're so completely disrespectful it's not even funny. Yet this fantastic genre employed all these technicians and all these actors, made over 300 movies in a period of four or five years, and *Once Upon a Time in the West* ended it.

When it comes to the filmmakers of the 1960s that mean the most to filmmakers of the 1990s and 2000s, I believe that Leone is pointing the way towards modern filmmaking. There is the excitement and the action scenes that you would see developed later in films like *The Terminator* . There is a sizzle to the action scenes. When Elvis Mitchell [the critic, scholar and broadcaster] shows a film to his young students -- this movie from the 1950s, this movie from the 1960s, this movie from the 1940s -- it's only when he shows them a Sergio Leone, if they haven't seen it before, that they pick up. That's when they start recognising the elements. That's when they're not just 'I'm looking at an older movie now.' It's the use of music, the use of the set piece, the ironic sense of humour. They appreciate the surrealism, the craziness, and they appreciate the cutting to music. So it is the true beginning of what filmmaking had evolved to by the 1990s. You don't go past Leone, you start with Leone.

For my money I think he is the greatest of all Italy's filmmakers. I would go even as far as to say that he is the greatest combination of a complete film stylist, where he creates his own world, and storyteller. Those two are almost never married. To be as great a stylist as he is and create this operatic world, and to do this inside a genre, and to pay attention to the rules of the genre, while breaking the rules all the time -- he is delivering you a wonderful western.

Bluff / The Beguiled / Catlow (1968, 1971, 1971)

COOGAN'S BLUFF

After making his first film in 1946 (the nifty Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre crime thriller *The Verdict*, which both predates Dirty Harry and Siegel's talent for audience misdirection), and directing twenty-four features, in 1968 Siegel was to start the creative collaboration that would soon define his career. His first film with Clint Eastwood, Coogan's Bluff.

It was the French Cahiers du Cinéma crowd and Andrew Sarris that made Siegel an auteur. But it was Coogan's Bluff that made Siegel, for the first time in his career, a major Hollywood director.

Coogan's Bluff plays like a trial run for the next twenty years of action cinema. It's with Coogan's Bluff that Eastwood would establish his post Leone persona. A persona that would dominate action cinema for the next twenty-five years. Coogan, the Stetson hat wearing Arizona deputy sheriff, would bridge the gap between the western hero that Eastwood was known for, and the big city cop he would become known for. Plus the whole film in the light of history plays like a Dirty Harry dress rehearsal. After the release of Dirty Harry it became the most imitated and ripped off action film of the modern age.

But even more important to Coogan's Bluff legacy than Dirty Harry are the comedic action films of the eighties, best epitomized by Eddie Murphy's *48 Hours* & *Beverly Hills Cop*. Yes of course the whole fish-outta'-water storyline of both *Beverly Hills Cop* & *Crocodile Dundee* are the same as Siegel's film (after Paramount put Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ into turnaround, the executives told him you can direct any movie we're making, and handed him the script to *Beverly Hills Cop.* Scorsese read it and told them, it's Coogan's Bluff).

But there's a more interesting level of influence on Walter Hill's *48 Hours*. First, there's the cop taking custody of a con set-up, only done as a buddy movie in the Hill film (speaking of Siegel influence, Nolte and the too-soon-to-be-dead cops who have the first encounter with trigger happy James Remar and Sonny Landham in the seedy hotel, could be the opening scene of Siegel's Madigan).

But more importantly, the single biggest influence on *48 Hours*, and eighties action cinema in general, was the surprising comic tone of Coogan's Bluff. For all intents and purposes, what we think of as comedic action cinema was born the day

Coogan's Bluff was released. Action films had been funny before (Howard Hawks), and even Eastwood had made funny action films before (Leone's Dollars Trilogy is fucking hysterical), but not quite like Coogan's Bluff. Siegel establishes a tone of genuine wit in the film's first half, both through dialogue (the clueless New Yorkers constantly referring to the cowboy hat wearing Arizona lawman as Tex), and the comic interplay of the performers. Especially a more animated than usual Eastwood, and a never more charismatic Lee J. Cobb. Then contrasts it with Eastwood's no nonsense attitude towards the film's heavy Don Stroud, who shares a superficial similarity with James Remar's escaped convict killer in 48 Hours (Eddie Murphy's Axel Foley would share a similar played-straight antagonism with Steven Berkoff's Victor Maitland). Then punctuates it with action set pieces designed to thrill or scare, Stroud's airport escape (good), the pool hall brawl (great), and the climatic motorcycle chase (silly).

THE BEGUILED

This somber story set during the Civil War deals with a wounded Yankee solder (Clint Eastwood), who's found and given shelter by the young students of a southern girls finishing school. As the females hide the bedridden enemy soldier from patrolling bands of rebels, the sexy enemy begins to become a catalyst for the women and girl's different desires. *The Beguiled* was the closest Siegel ever came to making an art film (it was his favorite of all his pictures), and truth be told, as good as it is, as its director, he's miscast.

While the offbeat film is ultimately successful, it does bring out Siegel's worst stylistic impulses. His fondness for Freudian imagery, his literalness in a tale that screams for ambiguity (a dream sequence in the middle makes explicit everything that had only been suggested). However, once Siegel settles down and focuses on Eastwood, the film comes alive. "The Beguiled" deals with its gothic Ambrose Bierce Americana in a decidedly Gallic way.

In a lot of ways it could be a same-era René Clément film, with Eastwood playing the Alain Delon male sex object part (Siegel's first choice for the headmistress was Jeanne Moreau, though it's hard to imagine bettering Geraldine Page's portrayal). Because of the choice of subject matter, tone, approach, and especially Bruce Surtees' cinematography, it's the most like a later day Eastwood-directed picture.

CATLOW

Based on the novel by popular and prolific western writer Louis L'Amour (supposedly his funniest book), and directed by actor Sam Wanamaker (the director of the *Lancer* pilot), along with Burt Kennedy's *Dirty Dingus Magee* & Andrew V. McLaglen's *Something Big*, *Catlow* is my nomination for worst studio western of the seventies.

Yul Brynner, in the worst performance of his career, plays Catlow, the leader of a cattle drive of rustled cattle. The cows aren't really rustled, they're maverick steers that the politically connected, greedy guts Cattlemen's Association (boo-hiss) have deemed rustled to squash the little man on the march. So hot on Catlow and his silly cowpoke compañero's trail (including Jeff Corey in the old timer Arthur Hunnicutt sidekick role), are two different lawmen. One, a deputy Marshall (Richard Crenna, the film's real lead), who's an old friend of the cantankerous Catlow.

Crenna, with warrant in hand, wants to bring his old friend into custody safe and sound. But much to Crenna's chagrin, the wily Catlow keeps tricking, outsmarting, and thwarting his efforts. The other being a bounty hunter played by Leonard Nimoy, who had a vendetta against the bald one, and intends to bring him back dead over a saddle.

Yul Brenner, so good in the same year's *The Light At The Edge Of The World*, is badly miscast as Catlow. He just can't pull off this rascally happy-go-lucky Glenn Ford type charmer. Rod Taylor, who at that time was in a similar boat as Brenner, would have made a terrific Catlow.

Thankfully, his work in Margheriti's *Death Rage* (his best seventies performance) was in his future. And, in Michael Crichton's *Westworld*, Yul got his iconic persona back on track. For a few moments in the beginning, Nimoy seems promising, if only for the fact it's his lone theatrical movie (till Invasion of the Body Snatchers in 1978) post Star Trek fame. Since he's the only character allowed to play dangerous, you keep waiting for Nimoy's more serious movie to take over. But by mid-film Nimoy's character loses his credibility along with everybody else.

Highlight, Julián Mateos, Spanish star of Sergio Corbucci's The Hellbenders. Lowlight, Jo Ann Pflug, TV mainstay and Lt. Dish in Altman's M.A.S.H., playing Mateos' supposedly Mexican sister.

Cade's County: A Gun For Billy (1971)

David Carradine, a friend of movie star *Glenn Ford,* once told me that in the late sixties, Ford gave his agents some specific marching orders. He wanted to do three pictures a year. He wanted to be paid 200,000 dollars a picture. And *he didn't care what they were.* So naturally that led to some pretty mediocre, uninspired movies (*Smith, Heaven with a Gun & A Time For Killing).* Then Glenn decided to make the move to television. He started off with the quality TV movie horror film *Brotherhood of the Bell,* directed by one of my favorite genre director's Paul Wendkos *(in Once Upon a Time in….Hollywood it's Wendkos who directed Rick Dalton in Tanner & The Fourteen Fists of McCluskey).*

Then in 1971, the man who was one of the most popular leading men of the fifties, starred in his own TV series. He wasn't alone among former fifties and sixties big time movie stars moving to series TV. Rock Hudson *(McMillan and Wife),* Anthony Quinn *(The City),* Richard Widmark *(Madigan)* & George Peppard *(Banacek)* all followed him. But when Glenn Ford moved to the CBS fall line-up, he did it in a damn good show called *Cade's County.*

Cade's County was a modern day western show where Ford played *Sam Cade,* the Marshall of a desert community called *Madrid County.* Where *exactly* Madrid County was located (New Mexico, Arizona, California), was never clarified.Ford moved through his last few pictures with conviction, but without passion. But the excitement of Ford headlining a television series was the real deal. And the seasoned charming man of action rose to the occasion.

CBS put a lot of effort and money into bringing the movie star to the tube in style. It had the best episodic directors of the time, *Lee Philips, Robert Day, Reza Badiyi (Jennifer Jason Leigh's stepfather),* David Lowell Rich, and Leo Penn *(Sean's dad).* And a gallery of big name guest stars all playing colorful characters, Darren McGavin, William Shatner, Martin Sheen, Cameron Mitchell, George Maharis, and the star of the episode under discussion, singing star and actor, Bobby Darin *(*two years before his death). Darin's episode, *A Gun For Billy,* is not only considered the best episode of this fondly remembered show, it's considered by many to be one of the best episodes of an action series of the seventies.

It's one of those TV episodes that if you saw it when it aired*,* like I did with my dad, you never forgot it. Bobby Darin plays *Billy Dobbs*, a man released from prison after serving eleven years. While in prison Billy turned into a schizophrenic who *thinks* he's the western outlaw *Billy the Kid.*

The opening of the show gets my vote for most dynamic opening teaser of a TV series of the seventies, if not of all time. Billy, wearing period western cowboy duds, crests a hill on horseback, singing a little cowboy ditty to himself (*Oh lord what a mornin', oh lord what a mornin', oh lord what a mornin' when the sun begins to shine).* He dismounts his steed and removes from the back of his saddle, what appears to be a long rifle or a buffalo gun, wrapped up in a blanket. Then the camera cuts behind him, and we see Billy's on the hill looking down on a modern empty highway road, with a lone armored car moving his way.As he continues to sing to himself, he squats down on his haunches, and unwraps the blanket, but we don't see its contents below frame. Then finally Billy rises to a standing position and raises the weapon he just unwrapped.

Only it's not a rifle…it's a *bazooka!*

Then he fires a *rocket* into the armored car, putting a big hole in the side, and blowing the damn thing right off the road (*he stole the bazooka from a gun collector, as well as a pistol owned by the real Billy the Kid).* Then he mounts back up on his horse, and proceeds to rob the fallen armored car as if it were a stagecoach. Then rides off with thirty thousand dollars (*this is such a damn good idea I'm surprised another screenwriter hasn't used it again. Or nobodies tried it in real life).* Billy's plan is to get his wife back (*TheHigh Chaparral's Linda Cristal)*, and kill the man who sent him to prison (*Close Encounters Warren J. Kemmerling),* and pull off a daring train robbery. However upon arriving at his former wife's house (who wants nothing to do with him), he realizes he has a son she never informed him of (none other then a pre-*Tiger Beat stardom Leif Garrett)*. So he snatches the boy, and proceeds to live out the life of Billy the Kid as he sees it (his schizophrenia is explained to Cade by a prison psychiatrist played by a pre-*Bosley David Doyle),* with Ford's Sam Cade hot on his trail tracking him down. By the time the two meet at the climax, in an old fashioned western showdown, this bonkers Billy the Kid thinks Cade is *Sheriff Pat Garrett (I'm gonna' git' you Big Casino!).*

Billy Dobbs is one of the best characters that Bobby Darin ever played. Darin had a pretty impressive movie career. He did his fair share of light comedies (*I really like the movies he did with his wife Sandra Dee),* but unlike Pat Boone, Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Tommy Sands, Darin (like Frank Sinatra), was given the opportunity to play some challenging parts.

He's fantastic in John Cassavetes first studio feature, *Too Late Blues,* as the cowardly Jazz musician, and opposite Sidney Poitier as the American Nazi party fascist in *Pressure Point.* Apparently, when he made *Don Siegel's Hell Is for Heroes,* he and Steve McQueen hated each other. Hollywood columnist James Bacon quoted Darin as saying in reply to the statement that McQueen was his own worst enemy, "Not while I'm alive he ain't."

A Gun for Billy was written by Anthony Lawrence one of the best episodic TV writers in the business. He also wrote another excellent episode for the *Kurt Russell and Tim Matheson* western series *The Quest,* titled *Seventy-Two Hours*, guest starring *Cameron Mitchell* in one of his best performances. As well as writing *Roustabout,* one of my favorite *Elvis Presley* movies, *and Elvis: The Movie* with Kurt Russell. *A Gun For Billy* would be directed in dynamic fashion by *Richard Donner* six years before he'd helm *The Omen.* Donner directed a lot of good episodes of fun series in the sixties and seventies (*The Man From U.N.C.L.E. & Baynon),* but *A Gun For Billy* would be his best directed work till he directed *The Omen.*

You can watch it tonight on YouTube.

Shoot Out (1971)

The creative team behind *True Grit* – director Henry Hathaway, producer Hal B. Wallis, and screenwriter Marguerite Roberts reunite for another western. Gregory Peck plays an outlaw who's just been released from a seven year prison stretch. His plan is to serve up some revenge to the bushwacking partner (James Gregory) who put him there. Instead he gets saddled with a seven year old little girl (Dawn Lyn) left for him by a former female companion.

The film's pretty mediocre (I tried watching it once before on the western channel and didn't make it to the finish). A secondary plot of Peck and little Lyn being shadowed by a pack of prairie scum (Robert F. Lyons, Susan Tyrrell, John Davis Chandler, and Pepe Serna) hired by Gregory doesn't work due to Lyons awful overacting (a regular feature of a Robert F. Lyons performance back then. Just check out his unhinged emoting in *Pendulum* and the otherwise excellent *Dealin*. One can't help but think of what Susan Tyrrell thought of Lyons carrying on).

However, this time screening the film with a great 35mm print, the film eventually took hold. Mostly due to the growing relationship between tall grizzled Peck and short smiling Lyn. While Hathaway's attempts to make the film closer to a rougher, more violent seventies western doesn't really work, it does make it different from other horsing around Hathaway romps like *The Sons of Katie Elder* and *Five Card Stud* (and towards the end a surprising dose of children in violent jeopardy, which is always a welcome addition to any film).

The most interesting part of the picture is how it predates Peter Bogdonovich's *Paper Moon* by three years. In both movies a shady man is left, against his will, in charge of the daughter of a deceased former flame who he may or may not be the father. Nothing special, but by the time it was over, I enjoyed it and was glad I saw it.

Hathaway's next film after this (his last film) would be the almost never shown blaxploitation flick *Super Dude*.

Sometimes a Great Notion (1971)

One of my favorite Pauline Kael quotes was about the lame Paul Newman service comedy *The Secret War of Harry Frigg* (not to be confused with the lame Charlton Heston service comedy The Private War of Major Benson or Frank Tashlin's sad swan song *The Private Navy of Sgt. O'Farrell*). Where Kael asked with witty incredulity about Newman's directorial aspirations, "How can somebody who wants to direct, work with Jack Smight twice?"

(Smight was admittedly a hack, but also admittedly I do enjoy a few films, *Traveling Executioner, Fast Break,* and his TV movie *The Longest Night* which I shamelessly ripped off for both Kill Bill Vol 2 & my CSI episode which was ironically edited by his son Alec Smight).

But to direct is what Newman wanted. And interestingly enough it wasn't movies starring him he wanted to make. He wanted to deal with harsh emotional material (mostly theatrical adaptations) that he never sought to appear in. In a way he was like a theatrical material oriented John Cassavetes, crafting intense emotional experiences that struck most audiences as cruel endurance tests more then entertainment (especially *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds*, which powerful as it is, plays like emotional child torture porn). As well as, like Cassavetes, crafting bravura performances for his wife Joanne Woodward (considered at the time one of America's finest actresses).

And speaking of at the time, Newman after 1969's *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* was at the height of his second wave of movie star popularity. He had been voted in 1969 & 1970 the number one box office star in America. But as opposed to his two Woodward led passion projects *(Rachel, Rachel & Gamma Rays*) the movie adaptation of Ken Kesey's *Sometimes A Great Notion* was a starring vehicle that became a directorial job after he fired the original director Richard (Fuzz) Colla (that's how Brando ended up directing *One-Eyed Jacks*, by firing Kubrick. Sidney Poitier fired Joseph Sargent from *Buck and the Preacher* then took his place. And Clint Eastwood fired Philip Kaufman from *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and assumed the helm. Now the DGA won't let stars or producers do that anymore).

Sometimes a Great Notion is a good somewhat compromised movie, that is justly famous for one of the greatest scenes in early seventies cinema. Most of the fervent admirers of Kesey's novel find, except for that scene, the movie a rather lackadaisical adaptation of their favorite book. But most of us who only know the

material from Newman's movie, that scene alone is enough to make it a classic of its era.

Newman tells the story of the Stampers, a family outfit of loggers (lumberjacks) in the woods of Oregon. The family is led figuratively by wounded loudmouth patriarch Henry Fonda, and literally by oldest beer drinking son Newman. In contrast to hateful Fonda and surly Newman, is younger brother Richard Jaeckel who's by far the friendliest member of the family (how he ever held on to this sunny disposition in this brood of brutes is never dealt with in the film). Newman focuses on two storylines. The Stamper's bitter feud with everybody else in the community, who are locked in a strike against the larger logging companies. But the logger union has no jurisdiction over maverick family outfits like the Stamper's. And the Stamper's have no loyalty to the socialist pinko unions, as Fonda refers to them. So while the desperate striking union loggers are suffering without work or pay, the Stamper's continue cutting trees, and fulfilling contracts that allow the logging bosses to persevere through the strike.

the film goes on the resentment of the Stamper's neighbors turns from exasperation to desperation to outright bitter hatred. And the insistence of the Stamper's family motto: Never give a inch, goes from family pride, to hostel indifference, to go fuck yourself, Charlie obstinance. This is the film's real story. And except for a nighttime rain drenched pow wow between the Stamper's and the union representatives, under-dramatized. The second story is that of Fonda's youngest son, and Newman and Jaeckel's half brother, long haired hippyish Michael Sarrazin, returning after years away and the suicide of his mother, to the family household and business for reasons that remain mysterious.

Whatever star quality Sarrazin had in the late sixties and early seventies (he was almost Joe Buck in *Midnight Cowboy*), had completely disappeared by the end of the decade (though he's surprising effective in a supporting role in Lewis Teague's vigilante opus *Fighting Back*). But Sarrazin, with his sexy shaggy hair and dark glasses is absolutely gorgeous in Notion, and gives Newman a run for his money in the sex appeal department. But Sarrazin being gorgeous isn't a surprise, what's surprising is how effective he is in this cast of heavyweights. You completely buy him as a surly selfish Stamper.

A good thirty five percent of the film is magnificent footage of the Stamper's cutting down huge majestic trees, shot by second unit master Michael Moore, that go a long way to explaining who the Stamper's are. As Newman tells Sarrazin, about what they do, "It's hard work, it ain't much fun, but we're pretty good at it."

A third storyline, only marginally dealt with, is an impressively beautiful Lee Remick as Newman's marginalized wife, who's come to see the Stamper's for what they are. She's also the only one to see the hollowness of that family motto: Never give an inch.

Why not?

Would giving an inch be so terrible?

What can you afford, if you can't afford to give an inch?

Again, this is only dramatized in the margins. There even is a half- hearted attempt to create a three-way love triangle between Newman, Remick, and Sarrazin that is utterly unconvincing. But competing storylines aside, the whole film seems compromised from its original intention. Sequences seem slapdashly truncated. Many scenes either start way too deep in, or end abruptly short. You get the feeling a good portion of the material in the novel that would give the story resonance, is left out. This isn't an attempt to turn a great novel into a equally great film. It's simply an effort to take the material in the novel and fashion a movie out of it. The problem lies in the fact that the actors do such a good job creating the family dynamic of these selfish hard heads, you wish the production attacked the material from the outset with more ambition.

But then…there's that scene.

THAT FUCKING SCENE!

That scene where journeyman actor Richard Jaeckel (who I've watched easily over a hundred times in movies and TV shows) after a lifetime spent playing secondary characters in genre films, is allowed a show stopping duet with the biggest movie star of his era. And in this sequence, Jaeckel and Newman are perfect. After a lifetime of westerns and war films Jaeckel received an Academy Award Nomination for best supporting actor for his performance at the 1971 edition of the Academy Awards (he lost to Ben Johnson that year in *The Last Picture Show*).

Like the Russian roulette sequence in *The Deer Hunter*, and the sodomy sequence in *Deliverance*, or the warehouse Mexican stand off in *8 Million Ways to Die*, suddenly the film turns into Opera.

What does that mean?

I dunno. It's just me trying to express how large the film suddenly becomes. As incomplete as Sometimes a Great Notion is, that fucking scene is one of Paul Newman's greatest accomplishments.

Newman was probably the least emotionally demonstrative of the American great actors. After his early method performances (his performance as Billy the Kid in The Left Handed Gun is a caricature of bad fifties method acting), Newman avoided big displays of anguished emotion. Anger, yes, anguish, no. He preferred to fester his emotions on the inside, trusting we could see through the mask of his handsome face. He had no taste for scenery chewing, unless in the service of comedy (the poker game in *The Sting*, trying to turn himself into Warren Oates in *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, his underrated turn as vainglorious charlatan in *Buffalo Bill and The Indians*). And he didn't need histrionics. Newman drinking a mug of beer as he plays pinball during the opening of *The Verdict* is more evocative than most actors highlight reels.

But during that fucking scene, Newman allows both him and us (the audience who've watched him for these last eighteen years) a very rare demonstration of anguish. What makes it doubly meaningful, is as rare as it was for Newman the actor, it was an even rarer display of human emotion from his stonehearted Stamper character. In that way, you could say, Newman the artist identified with the Stamper motto of Never Give An Inch. In the story, Stamper realizes the cost of living by that maxim. But Newman the artist and we his adoring audience, experience the cathartic release of Paul Newman giving an inch.

Ulzana's Raid (1972)

When Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* won Marlon Brando the best actor award at the 1972 Academy Awards, the actor refused it on protest grounds of the inhuman depictions of Native Americans in American movies. Grounds of which John Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk, Fort Apache,* and The Searchers would be case in point. But in The New Hollywood of the seventies, the reigning breed of directors, the film school educated Movie Brats (Coppola, Bogdanovich, Scorsese, Spielberg, Lucas, Milius and Schrader), it was the films of the older Hollywood picture makers that critic Andrew Sarris categorized as The Pantheon that the Movie Brats publicly revered, even using Sarris' classification of "Pantheon" to describe them.

Scorsese tells Schrader during a Q&A in the front of the publication of the Taxi Driver script:

"…in 1961 I read, in FILM CULTURE, Andrew Sarris' article based on the theories of CAHIERS, the POLITIQUE DES AUTEURS, which is old history now. But I went through the lists and underlined every one of the films I saw and put a star next to the ones I liked. Of all the directors, I found I liked the "Pantheon" directors the most. I liked John Ford's films best – and they weren't all westerns either."

In the Andrew Yule book about Bogdanovich, "Picture Shows," Peter tells Yule that Sarris and New York Times second-string critic Eugene Archer were big influences in his early days of film appreciation:

"They opened my eyes to films, getting me to see stuff like Howard Hawks' *Land of the Pharaohs* and John Ford's *Fort Apache*. I'd seen lots of films by both these guys, but I'd never noted their names as the common factor, it had never sunk in… I'd always loved Hawks without knowing he was the director. I loved *Rio Bravo* when it came out, then I said, 'Wait a minute, he did *Red River*,' and I put it all together. I'd liked all his films, but I hadn't known who he was!"

Now with a few exceptions (Haig, Manoogian, Scorsese's teacher at NYU for example), this reverence for John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock was not something they were taught in university. Most film schools in the late sixties would be quicker to screen *Children of Paradise*, or *La Strada*, or *La Grande Illusion* than they would *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*.

In the late sixties, Australian director Richard Franklin was a film student at Southern California's USC. Franklin would later establish himself as the Hitchcock of Australia in the eighties with the witty thrillers (usually written by talented pulp screenwriter Everette DeRoach) *Patrick, Road Games* (for years my favorite Australian movie), and *Psycho II*.

But back in his university days, taking a page out of Bogdanovich's playbook, he got in touch with both Hitchcock and Ford, inviting them to come and speak to the students. Even managing to get an invite from Mr. Hitchcock to visit the set of his then current film, *Topaz*. Later in the class, Franklin spoke up about one subject or the other. And the class instructor said to him, "Oh yeah, you're the one who keeps inviting all these hacks to speak to students." However, this reverence for the old guard Hollywood picture makers the Movie Brats loved wasn't necessarily shared by their competing group of filmmaking colleagues, The Post Sixties Anti-Establishment Auteurs (Altman, Rafelson, Penn, Perry, Ashby, Schatzberg and Cassavetes).

Now like The Movie Brat generation, these Anti-Establishment Auteurs watched old movies growing up, too. Bob Rafelson's first film, *Head,* starring the fabricated rock group The Monkees, and written by Jack Nicholson, is basically a collection of skits lampooning the old movies on The Late Show. Micky Dolenz and Teri Garr in a Cavalry and Indians put on, Davy Jones and Annette Funicello in a Golden Boy parody, and The Monkees playing dandruff in the greasy black hair of Victor Mature.

But as opposed to Bogdanovich, Scorsese, Spielberg, and Milius, when this era of filmmakers watched old movies on television, they weren't as enamored of what they saw. When they watched John Ford westerns, they were appalled at the jingoistic white supremacy on display. When they watched The Searchers, they didn't see a conflicted man trying to find his place in society that had outlived his usefulness. They saw a movie about an Indian hating racist bastard who is ultimately offered absolution by the grateful community (i.e. White Society). They rejected the morality of the wrap up at the end of Ford's *Fort Apache*. When John Wayne's character Captain Kirby York, who's been at odds with Henry Fonda's Lt. Cl. Owen Thursday over his brutal racist methods regarding the Native American's all movie long, later lionizes the racial cleansing nincompoop in death, the meaning is clear…White Supremacy. Now this White Supremacy is cloaked under different names… Americanism… Esprit De Corps… Civilized Society… (i.e. White Society), but in the context of Ford's Fort Apache, that's just a bramble bush

by a different name. And frankly, that meaning was clear even in 1948 when the movie was released. American (white) audiences not only didn't care, for the most part they agreed. One who didn't agree was maverick filmmaker Robert Aldrich.

Ulzana's Raid is hands down Aldrich's best films of the seventies, as well as being one of the greatest westerns of the seventies. One of the things that makes the movie so remarkable is it isn't just a western; it combines the two genres that Aldrich was most known for, westerns and war films. Many movies have been made about the conflict between the Apaches and the American Calvary but only Aldrich's film dealt with the Apache Wars as a genuine military conflict. Or more to the point, a war film about a giant nationalistic military machine battling a guerrilla army it can't comprehend. At this point in time, Aldrich seemed obsessed with Vietnam. Overtones of it show up in *The Dirty Dozen*, everything about *Too Late The Hero* seems designed to invoke it and *Twilight's Last Gleaming* seemed to be made so Aldrich could voice his opinion about it .

But before Hollywood finally turned its camera towards it in the late seventies (*Boys in Company C* & *Go Tell the Spartans*), Vietnam allegories were the only avenue of expression. Now in a world where hundreds of Vietnam movies exist (Filipino filmmaker Cirio H. Santiago has made over ten. Not to mention all the Italian Rambo rip-offs that clogged the arteries of video stores all through the eighties), these allegories can't help but seem quaint at best, and naive at worst. But not *Ulzana's Raid*. Because its examination of the U.S. Military involvement with the Apache Wars is a compelling enough subject on its own. As is the attention to the strategy of warfare on both sides of the conflict. The legendary writer Alan Sharp's screenplay offers no easy interpretation of either events or character motivation.

The reasons that led Ulzana to run off the reservation with twenty men and engage in brutal bloody slaughter of all who lay in his path, is only vaguely hinted at (being short-changed by the man who sells beef to the reservation). It would have been very easy to lay the blame on some pigheaded Indian-hating white officer (like Fonda's Col. Thursday in Ford's *Fort Apache*), so we could be frustrated by the unfairness of it all. Or to romanticize Ulzana by casting a young good looking dark-haired (white) actor like Robert Blake in *Tell 'em Willie Boys Here* or Robert Forster in *The Stalking Moon*. Or illustrate the events leading up to the raid, and show how events just spiraled out of control (like in Robert Young's *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*). But neither Sharp nor Aldrich engage in such dramatization niceties. Joaquin Martinez, who plays Ulzana is pug ugly perfect, and, aside from some ritualistic singing, has no lines in the film. Yet he's not the monster in a

monster movie that killer Indian "Salvaje" is in *The Stalking Moon*. He's a partisan, fighting an occupying army. His goal isn't to win, it's to spill as much of the occupiers' blood as possible. Yet while the film makes no attempt to make Ulzana sympathetic, he gets our and Aldrich's sympathy anyway. It's easy for audiences to root for the Indians in westerns now, no matter what they do. But Aldrich and Sharp make it difficult, but we still root for them nonetheless. I feel this is Burt Lancaster's best performance of his later years.

The character of the old white Indian scout, who's seen it all, and understands the nature of the native people in ways that no one who wears a blue uniform ever will, is a staple of Alan Sharp's western screenplays. In Ulzana's Raid that part, Ke-Ni-Tay, is played by Mexican movie star Jorge Luke, and he owns the picture. When white wet-behind-the-ears West Point Lt. DeBuin (Bruce Davison) asks Luke's Ke-Ni-Tay why his people are so cruel, he answers without any Indian mystic mumbo jumbo or a shred of political correctness; "That's just the way they are. They've always been that way." Slowly during the course of the movie, Luke's Ke-Ni-Tay, little by little, takes center stage. So much so that despite all the cruel killings Ulzana and his men commit, audiences feel more hostility towards Bruce Davison's Lt.DeBuin for how he treats Ke-Ni-Tay than anybody else in the film (Aldrich didn't hate Davison's West Pointer, "He doesn't know shit"). To me the Indian scout working with the white man's military against his own people, is the most despicable character in the conflict. Yet by film's end it's Luke, not Lancaster, that emerges as the closest thing the movie has to a hero, without avoiding the troubling aspects of his character, or his position.

In Peter Bogdanovich's book "Pieces of Time," he tells an interesting story of being at the White House in 1972 and meeting President Nixon. Since the thing one would talk with Peter about is movies, Nixon and Bogdanovich drift into a conversation of Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

Bogdanovich is understandably tickled as hell to be talking to the President in the White House about one of his favorite directors and one of his favorite movies. Now while the ending of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* isn't as offensive as the ending of *Fort Apache*, because Wayne's Tom Doniphon isn't as offensive as Fonda's Lt. Col. Thursday, it's still the same morale, "Print the Legend." Which by 1969 seemed dubious advice to White Europeans indulging in manifest destiny over indigenous natives. Of course Nixon likes John Ford. Who's the audience for Ford's apologias? Nixon's silent majority, that's who.

The Anti-Establishment Auteurs wanted to remake Ford's films too, but not the way Peter, and Steven, and Big John Milius did. They wanted to remake *Fort Apache* from the Apaches perspective. And in the case of Arthur Penn with *Little Big Man*, Ralph Nelson with *Soldier Blue*, and Robert Aldrich (not post-sixties, and hardly a hippy, but absolutely anti-establishment) with Ulzana's Raid, they did.

The Yakuza (1972)

The film that made Paul Schrader's name as a screenwriter in Hollywood was his script for the Japanese set gangster film *The Yakuza*, which takes a current (70's) popular Japanese film genre (Yakuza gangster films) and the genre's most popular star (the smoldering Ken Takakura), and crafts it for western consumption by adding Robert Mitchum.

Schrader told Brett Easton Ellis, "We [Paul and his brother Leonard] had written a Yakuza gangster movie in the Toei Studio gangster tradition." At the end of that script, the Schraders give us the first of Paul's blood-all-over-the-walls climaxes to reach the screen. Takakura Ken takes on his Japanese opponents, shirtless, green dragon tattoo covering his muscled back, with a samurai sword, while Big Bob Mitchum blasts through rice paper walls with a double barrel shotgun. Talk about East meets West!

Even Scorsese admitted that Travis' final bloodbath at the end of *Taxi Driver* was motivated by a sense of bushido honor; "Paul saw it was a kind of samurai death with honor – that's why DeNiro attempts suicide." Schrader even felt Scorsese's final bloodbath wasn't bloody enough. Scorsese said: "He felt that if he directed the scene, there would have been tons of blood all over the walls, a more surrealistic effect," like Japanese movies. The Japanese way is to exaggerate and emphasize thus making surreal."

The general word on *The Yakuza*, from both Schrader and the big deal critics of its day, was that director Sydney Pollack was not the man for the job. Pauline Kael spent about thirty percent of her review listing all the filmmakers who would have been better suited for this property. Pollack wasn't perfect casting for the project. Nevertheless *The Yakuza* remains a unique, nifty 70's gangster thriller with two great action stars being outstanding.

Mitchum through the rest of the 70's and 80's would periodically do effective work (I especially like his turn as John Savage's father in Andrei Konchalovsky's *Maria's Lovers*). But more often than not, in whatever role he was playing – movie studio executive in *The Last Tycoon*, tv executive in *Scrooged*, advertising executive in *Agency* – he played an oak tree. In *Farewell, My Lovely* he played an oak tree in a snap brim fedora. It's exemplified by watching all twelve hours of his starring performance in the eighties mini-series *Winds of War* (you always felt sorry for Victoria Tennant whenever they made her kiss him). But in *The Yakuza*,

for the last time as a lead, Mitchum was vibrantly alive. Apparently, Pollack stressed the *The Way We Were* aspect of the love story inside the Yakuza story (Mitchum and dignified Kishi Keiko play reunited lovers from World War II.) But that aspect of the story is one of the film's most effective features. And that's mostly due to the romantic, moony, wounded bear quality that Mitchum brings to the role.

Takukara Ken became a superstar in Japan after starring in the stark, stylistic black and white snow-set prison escape adventure *Abashiri Bangaichi*. Directed by tough guy mystro Teruo Ishii, who Ken shared an artistic relationship with similar to Don Siegel and Clint Eastwood's. *Abashiri Bangaichi* would eventually produce a fourteen film Japanese action film series (I've only seen the first one, without sub-titles, and it's terrific). While Ken is one of the most iconic stars in the history of Japanese cinema, and even though he's done a few other international productions (*Too Late the Hero*, *Black Rain*, *Mr. Baseball),* most western audiences only know him from this movie. But in *The Yakuza* he delivers such a perfect presentation of his persona that it's all you really need to know. And this comes after a period of a few international productions (*Hell in the Pacific* & *Red Sun*) that featured Toshiro Mifune, and Mifune seemed less than. So Takakura Ken's powerhouse performance, at the height of his fame, in this Hollywood Yakuza flick, seems even more of a triumph.

Now according to Schrader, *The Yakuza* original director was Robert Aldrich. Which theoretically seems perfect. I say theoretically, because theoretically Aldrich should have been perfect for *Emperor of the North*. But instead of the muscular rusty claw hammer type direction you'd expect from the big man, Aldrich gives into corny thirties theatrics. The film seems more like a Damon Runyonesque musical about hobos than the crowbar vs. chain donnybrook that MGM sold it to audiences as. But in the end, the two Bobs (Mitchum & Aldrich) couldn't get along. Aldrich probably still resented Mitchum's non-performance in his WWII Greek resistance compromised failed epic *The Angry Hills*. So Pollack was enlisted.

It wasn't that Pollack wasn't up to the action in the picture. His comedy western *The Scalphunters* holds up better these days than a lot of Sydney's better-known movies. Redford's fight with the assassin disguised as a postman in the Christmas-tree-sporting living room in *Three Days of the Condor* predates a lot of the spectacular fights to come out of Hong Kong in the eighties. And the swordplay – shotgun action in *The Yakuza*'s rousing vengeance climax is well done. And considering the film was made at Warner Brothers, the same studio that

made *Enter The Dragon*, Schrader should be counting his lucky stars that Robert (clod) Clouse didn't get assigned to his Asian-western project. It's just you wish a director with a greater facility with pulp (Aldrich, Don Siegel, Phil Karlson, Ralph Nelson), or a director with the sensibility to turn pulp into art (Peckinpah, Polanksi, Joseph H. Lewis) had been in charge.

Pollack was the top of the line when it came to popular Hollywood studio picture makers who worked well with big stars. Pollack was neither the artist or the storyteller that George Roy Hill was. But Hill aside, when compared to his other Hollywood picture maker contemporaries, Pollack was the class act. I prefer him to Frankenheimer, Lumet, Hiller, Huston, and even Arthur Penn.

But Pollack was a tasteful Hollywood picture maker. And his tasteful sensibility required Pollock to insist on a rewrite to John Milius' original script for *Jeremiah Johnson* that jettisoned the more outrageous Milius moments. And that same sensibility was at work with the Schrader brothers' script for *The Yakuza*. Sydney even brought in big gun scribe Robert Towne to do his own polish.

I knew a fellow who ran a second run movie house in Redondo Beach, California, called the Marina 3 (long since defunct). And *The Yakuza* was his favorite movie, which he would screen once or twice a year, on the lower half of his double bills, all throughout the eighties.

And the film's final coda, "The Finger cutting scene," is, for me, one of the great endings of any movie of its era. And arguably Mitchum's single greatest acting moment on film (as long as some fuckwad in the cinema doesn't laugh during it).

Deliverance (1972)

In retrospect, it's a little bizarre to appreciate the impact that the disturbing *Deliverance* made in its day (1972). The movie was not only a hit, it was a zeitgeist hit. The movie was part of the public conversation of the day in a way that thrillers and action movies seldom are. The very thing that made the movie disturbing is what made it a popular must-see movie in the summer of '72.

I saw it with my mom on a date at the age of ten on a double feature with *The Wild Bunch* (one of the greatest nights of moviegoing in my life) at The Tarzana Movies. One of the few cinemas at the time that had six screens (I remember I wanted to see Bert I. Gordon's *The Mad Bomber* with Chuck Connors. And at one point I snuck into that cinema screen and watched five minutes – as Bret Easton Ellis would say, "Ahhhh…the seventies").

The story tells the tale of four fellas from Atlanta – three of them upwardly mobile family men, Ed (Jon Voight), Bobby (Ned Beatty) and Drew (Ronny Cox), who follow their roguish hunting enthusiast buddy Lewis (Burt Reynolds) for a backwoods canoe trip down the Cahulawassee River. Their excursion is a week before a dam is to be finished that will flood the river under ten miles of water. The difference between the suburban husbands and the bachelor Lewis is striking. Lewis talks tough, acts tough (he alone is not intimidated by the backwoods characters they come across), and looks every inch a macho man (before the red shirt he wore as *The Bandit*, the weird scuba vest he wore as Lewis was Reynolds' most iconic film outfit).

Yet author James Dickey – and the movie – makes it clear Lewis is trying to live up to an idea of himself. He's not full of shit, but he's also not the authority he tries to come across as. The way he bluffs the hillbillies over the price of driving their cars down river is how he bluffs his buddies about his one-with-nature mountain man shtick. Behind Lewis' back, Beatty's Bobby asks the others, "Who does he think he is, Tarzan?" He's full of consumed facts, rather than experience-derived wisdom. He is quite a good bow hunter – but he's a sportsman, not a survivalist. He's a one-weekend-a-month warrior – more balls than brains, more opinion than knowledge. Lewis has the same expert relationship with the woods and the river that the people who call up right wing talk radio have with politics. Yes, he possesses more instinct than his three companions. But even his instinct, like his whole macho projection of self, is a pose. Not to say the pose is a lie.

Lewis isn't a fraud – he believes the pose, and it's a comfortable pose. But it's not who Lewis is, it's who he wants to be. The people Lewis models himself on can't turn it off and on; Lewis can. If Lewis owned a sporting goods store and needed an extension on his business loan, he could drop the pose when he went down to the bank to have a meeting with the loan officer. He would and could dress and act and talk like Ed. And that wouldn't be a lie either. Warren Beatty's hairdresser in Shampoo, George Roundy, can't pull off the loan meeting. Lewis could.It would have been easy for writer Dickey to give the husbands a genuine (paid) river expert as their guide. He could have served the exact same plot functions as Lewis, down to the same colorful commentary that Reynolds spouts through the whole first half (the best half) of the movie. But Dickey wants us to know that as good a game as Lewis talks, he has more in common with the three husbands than the real river folk they come in contact with. Lewis has eaten shrimp scampi and fried calamari in a fancy Atlanta seafood restaurant. His cigars are Cuban, not Dutch Masters. He knows how to order a Brandy Alexander and a Harvey Wallbanger and how it's supposed to taste.

Lewis has seen Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces*.

Lewis knows who Roman Polanski is.

Among the other three, only Beatty's Bobby is taken in by Lewis' "Tarzan" act, but he's new to the group. Voight's Ed and Cox's Drew follow Lewis' lead, but they're fully aware of what's behind it. The fact it's an entertaining pose is why they enjoy it. (The four men could be Hollywood filmmakers: you can imagine Spielberg, Lucas, and Scorsese as the husbands. And you can really imagine John Milius as Lewis.)

On the first day Drew announces, "Ed, I'm riding with you, because I've seen the way Lewis drives these mountain roads he don't know nuthin' about." The first day of the trip, it's Ed and Drew in one canoe, and Lewis and Bobby in the other. And Lewis barks orders at Bobby all day long. And not out of expertise, or in good-natured fun, but as a bully. He refers to Bobby as chubby in a way that diminishes him; it marks him as a soft man. He's the effeminate member of the male group. Even if they were thirty pounds heavier, it's a lack of respect that neither Ed nor Drew would tolerate. But since Bobby does tolerate it, it solidifies his position in the male dynamic. Later that night Bobby whines to Ed about Lewis' treatment with real anxiety, but it's not the tone of an indignant grown ass man. It's the tone of a whiny adolescent. Neither does he express his anxiety towards the object of his torment. Instead he tattletales to a reasonable surrogate

(Ed) in the hopes that he'll intervene.Likewise the next morning, Lewis tells Ed, not Bobby, "You take chubby boy today," further diminishing Bobby in the masculine group dynamic.

This trip down the river isn't a roller coaster. It requires the individual achievement of each man working in tandem with each other. What they're doing is legitimately dangerous. It's not like on a fishing outing Bobby is the most hapless of the fishermen or the most clumsy on the basketball court. Yet to my novice eyes it looks like Bobby does a good job. He lacks the confidence of the other men, but he's not an uncoordinated liability. Bobby deserves the recognition of his individual achievement, and it's the mark of Lewis' cruelty that he denies him the Hawksian recognition of, 'Good Job.'Inside of the group, Ed is the most trusted and liked. One, because he's everybody's point of contact. Bobby doesn't know Lewis, he's invited on the trip by Ed. Drew knows Lewis, but not like Ed does. In Dickey's novel, Ed is a graphic artist and Lewis is a landlord. It makes you wonder how Ed and Lewis became friends? How did they meet?What made Lewis invite Ed on his first hunting trip? What made Ed go? In the film, Lewis asks him, "Why do you go on these trips with me, Ed?" But Ed replies the way a movie character would, "You know, sometimes I wonder about that." No he doesn't.Lewis is quick to make speeches of his philosophy to the group. He also makes speeches of same to Ed in private ("Machines are gonna' fail"). But the speeches to Ed are much more intimate. When the group is his audience, Lewis' braggadocio, his survivalist rhetoric, his reckless driving, his daring to provoke the scary backwoods river folk is a performance designed to entertain an audience of one, himself.

But when the audience is Ed by his lonesome, it may be written by the same speechwriter, but it's delivered intimately to and for Ed. A homoerotic courtship plays itself out between Ed and Lewis in the film's first half. Not dissimilar to the courtship dance between Randolph Scott and Richard Boone in Budd Boetticher's "The Tall T." Lewis doesn't need or want Drew or Bobby's company. He'd much prefer if Ed went on this trip alone. And not for obvious reasons. For reasons not only does he not understand, but for reasons it would never occur to him to examine. Ed takes Bobby along to the woodsy weekend the way a pretty girl takes her fat girlfriend along to the club to meet a boy. It's Ed that Lewis wants to go down river with. It's Ed that Lewis wants to face the rapids with. The fact that both men are too shy to share a canoe together during the rough riding of white water is almost adorable. When they do share the canoe, as Ed lounges and Lewis fishes their dinner out of the river violently with his bow and arrow, Lewis performs his macho pose for Ed and Ed alone (it begs the question, who cooked the fish that night that Lewis spears with his arrow?). As Lewis prims and poses and opines for

Ed's viewing pleasure, he tells him sarcastically, "You got a nice wife. You got a nice kid." Ed, not offended but amused, replies, "You make that sound kinda' shitty, Lewis." To which Lewis (and especially Burt Reynolds) smiles and asks, "Then why do you go out on these trips with me, Ed?" Ed drops his smile, and makes an unaggressive stand for self, "I like my life, Lewis." Lewis repeats, "Why do you go on these trips with me?"

"You know, sometimes I wonder about that."

You know, maybe that line is better than I gave it credit for.

On the second day of the trip, it's Ed and Bobby in one canoe and Lewis and Drew in the other. Ed and Bobby get quite a bit ahead of the others (indicating that maybe Bobby isn't as awkward at this river rafting business as we've been led to believe).They pull off to the side of the river to take a break and wait for the other two to catch up. Up to this point Boorman has demonstrated a suspenseful forward momentum that he never demonstrated earlier and would never demonstrate again. Partly because the scripts for John Boorman movies are usually lousy (save for this one and *Hope and Glory*) – even as in *Point Blank* – when they're based on good books. Up until this point we know the movie, the story and the characters are heading somewhere…but unless you're hip to the plot…you really don't know where. Nor would you be able to guess. Most audiences who saw the movie in 1972 were completely unprepared for the dramatic turn of events. It's why they were so effective. Most audiences felt there would be some dramatic turn of events due to the men riding the treacherous rapids down river. It's clear something is going to happen on this trip. But other than his fun and games with the fella's wolf pack hierarchy, the filmmaker doesn't foreshadow or indicate in the slightest what that something is.

That something is the most profound and disturbing violent sequence in early seventies studio cinema not directed by Sam Peckinpah. It's also become one of the most iconic. Throughout the seventies and eighties people would indicate it unspoken simply by imitating the opening chords to the film's unofficial theme song Dueling Banjos. However, enough time has passed that not every new viewer will come to the movie with foreknowledge. Normally I don't care about revealing any plot detail. I'm not reviewing movies for a daily newspaper, I'm conducting analysis on movies that are generally forty years old. Nevertheless in this instance I'll confine that analysis to the film's first half. At some point I'll find another piece for myself to write where I can describe the ten-year-old me viewing the film's inciting incident of violence and my interpretation of it (obviously I didn't

understand exactly what was physically happening. What I understood was the character was being humiliated. And I was right).

What both the story and the theme of Dickey's book is really about is what happens after the inciting incident of violence. Boorman's narrative led to the hillbillies all along like bloodhounds following a scent. But Dickey's narrative propulsion was towards the four angry men's angry debate about what to do next. Almost any other scenario you could name and the story would just be a struggle for survival with a lurking enemy still at large constituting a threat. With almost any other scenario, once the men got down the river they'd run to the authorities and tell them what happened, and that would be that.

But the men in Deliverance are presented with a social taboo, that to one degree or another, will hang over all of them for the rest of their lives.But they're also presented with an opportunity to bury their secret because of the dam's completion and this entire area being flooded under ten miles of water. And as Lewis stresses to the other three, "Man, that's just about as buried as you can get."In other words, what happens in the woods, stays in the woods. And these four men can go back to their four ordinary lives with no one but themselves the wiser.With the movie provoking the audience with the question, "What would you do?"

Once the debate scene is over, the movie is never as effective again. The ambiguity of exactly what happened to Ronny Cox sets the whole third act off on the wrong foot. I'm fully aware it's supposed to be ambiguous. But Boorman's staging of the action and his directing of Cox's reaction at first confuses and ultimately irritates. Even if he judged it important that the characters be in the dark about what befalls Drew (I don't think it's necessary), the audience shouldn't be in the dark. From here on to end the movie gets slack. Ed's/Voight's rite of masculine passage is never as tense or exciting as it should be. It's so academic that the outcome is never in doubt. Now if his face was blown off and it was left for Bobby to save Lewis, that's a story! And what should be as equally tense as anything on the river, the survivors facing the authorities and brazing it out, is as dynamic as watching the hands of a clock.

Because Boorman makes the unfathomably perverse choice of presenting this entire section under-dramatized. It's so undramatic he could've cut to still pictures and had a novelist narrator fill you in on what happened. James Dickey himself plays the sheriff, and for the half-assed way Boorman films this section of the film he's effective. But this is the moment the movie needs another juicy character to come in and bring the story home. With the right actor in the right third act, the

sheriff character could of won the game by stealing home from his position on third base. But why Deliverance dribbles to its conclusion is also as obvious as a zebra in your kitchen. While thematically it's rich, and structurally it's daring to sideline Burt Reynolds' Lewis just before the third act…in this movie, cinematically, it's suicidal.

The Groundstar Conspiracy (1972)

George Peppard was a popular leading man through the first half of the sixties. He was a genuine movie star, with genuine hits to his credit: *Home from the Hill* (the movie that made him a star), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (his most enduring classic, though not due to him), *How the West Was Won, The Blue Max,* and his biggest hit that can be attributed to him, *The Carpetbaggers*.

Popular though he was, he never ascended to the superstar status that Paul Newman and Steve McQueen enjoyed. He stayed in the sixties middle tier alongside slightly older fifties leading men like Rock Hudson and Tony Curtis. Yet while he was never the movie stars they were, in the sixties he was more desirable due to his youth and the fact he looked like Newman and McQueen. So producers could try for Newman and McQueen and if that didn't work out, there was always Peppard. As Marvin Schwarz would say, "They want Marlon Brando, they get Burt Reynolds. They want Warren Beatty, they get George Hamilton. They want Newman and McQueen, they get Peppard."

Now, most of the movies Peppard did during his mid-sixties heyday were fairly entertaining.I can't really make a strong case for *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?, Operation Crossbow, The Third Day* and *The Carpetbaggers*, but that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy them (especially *Bad/Good)*.

His most creative time was probably his three-film collaboration with British director John Guillermin (who would later direct flaming traffic in *The Towering Inferno*).Not that the three movies he did with Guillermin (*The Blue Max, House of Cards* and *P.J.*) were so much better than his other movies, but Peppard seemed to vibe with Guillermin in a way he didn't with other directors. Also during his heyday, he had the misfortune to work with the most pedestrian of the sixties studio journeymen, Edward Dmytryk, Jack Smight and Michael Anderson.

However, by the late sixties, while still a movie star, he was a movie star on the decline.Before he could do big movies that Newman, McQueen, Sinatra and James Garner turned down. Now with the emergence of Clint Eastwood and Robert Redford, there really wasn't room for Peppard, not at the top at least. To put it in perspective, of the top twenty-eight box office stars of 1970, the year *Cannon for Cordoba* and *The Executioner* came out, Paul Newman was number one. Clint Eastwood was number two. Steve McQueen was number three. And John Wayne was number four. Robert Redford, the year after Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, entered the list at number eleven (He would be between one through five the

whole rest of the decade). Dean Martin was still on the list at number fourteen, but neither Frank Sinatra nor Jerry Lewis were. And for his last appearance on the list, Elvis Presley sat at twenty-one. But no George Peppard. No more big pictures like *How the West Was Won, The Victors, The Blue Max* or *The Carpetbaggers*.

Instead, he was offered the studio B-level product. Not bad movies, but modestly budgeted action vehicles, usually starring another movie star in the same boat, that were meant to make a quick buck at theaters, export well to Europe, play for the next three to four years as the lower half of studio double bills and when the time was right, move effortlessly on to network television.

Westerns, Rough Night in Jericho (with Dean Martin), Cannon for Cordoba, One More Train to Rob.
WW2 action, Tobruk (with Rock Hudson).
Spy flick, The Executioner.
Cop film, Pendulum.
And The Groundstar Conspiracy.

Funny thing is these are my favorite movies of Peppard's. I never really cared for him all that much in his sixties movies. Now admittedly the mediocrity of the standard sixties studio picture could strip the shine off of any star. Just look at some of the lifeless dogs that Paul Newman, Warren Beatty and James Garner starred in (by comparison McQueen's track record was pretty damn impressive). But my big problem with Peppard was he just wasn't convincing in the roles he ended up getting cast in.

In *Home on the Hill*, he's trying like hell to play the kind of surly sexy vagabond that Paul Newman specialized in (*Hud* & *The Long Hot Summer*) and while he's not bad, he doesn't quite pull it off either. He was often cast as the same type of surly bastards that McQueen pulled off effortlessly. Like in his biggest hit *The Carpetbaggers*. And you just don't buy it. He actually came across as a genial guy, who for some reason was usually cast as a hardass son-of-a-bitch.

Why he didn't do more comedies during his heyday is a mystery. He's completely unconvincing playing a beatnik hippie in *What's So Bad About Feeling Good?* (as he was in the movie version of Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*), but he's still funny in it and seems to be having a good time.It was a pretty weird decade. After establishing himself as a light touch comic master on his TV show *Maverick*, once James Garner became a genuine movie star, for the most part he was cast as colorless leads in movies like *Darby's Rangers, Cash McCall, The Pink Jungle, Up*

Periscope and *Grand Prix*. While McQueen, who wasn't terribly good at comedy, did far more than Peppard.

A good example of one of Peppard's better films is action specialist Paul Wendkos' *Cannon for Cordoba*. But it's also a good example of the type of role that Peppard seemed to specialize in that I never felt he was right for. That film, written by Stephen Kandel, who also wrote Wendkos' superior action film *The Battle of the Coral Sea*, was obviously designed to be the second of the Wendkos-directed and George Kennedy-starring *Magnificent Seven* sequels. Coming straight after their earlier film *Guns of the Magnificent Seven* (easily the best of the sequels).

But it's pretty clear once Kandel turned in his damn exciting script, The Mirisch Brothers (the producers) felt they could do better than George Kennedy. So they offered it to the other George, Peppard. Well, The Mirisch Brothers were right, the script was good and Peppard did respond to the material. But he'd be dammed if he was going to be the third guy to play Chris in the fourth cheapie sequel to *The Magnificent Seven*. So he instructed them, if they want him, lose *The Magnificent Seven* connection and name the character anything but Chris. So Kandel rewrote it, and Peppard's character went from Chris to Rod (but he kept Chris' fondness for cigars). And the team of guys went from *The Magnificent Seven* to The Magnificent Five. And the title changed from Cannons for The Magnificent Seven to *Cannon for Cordoba*.

Yet in the novelization that Stephen Kandel wrote, you can tell the character of Rod was written for George Kennedy and Kennedy would have been much better in the role. The book contains a description of the character. And it's the type of description I'm sure most of the characters that Peppard played were described as. Descriptions that didn't describe Peppard.

"Rod was a tall man, deceptively solid, with thick shoulders; a man laced together with a webbing of flat, sliding muscles. He had the quality of iron repose, a sense of limitless patience masking a capacity for explosive violence….he was not a man to disobey, nor a man to give orders casually. But the essential toughness was relieved by an abiding sense of the ridiculous, a twist of mockery in the eyes and mouth."

Now admittedly that purple prose description doesn't describe many members of the Screen Actors Guild. It describes Charles Bronson. Burt Lancaster. Lee Marvin. Maybe Eastwood a few years later. It even describes Robert DeNiro in the

eighties. But it sure didn't describe George Peppard. However, like I said, the collection of films from this period in Peppard's career are my favorite.

I still really dig *Cannon for Cordoba*. *Pendulum* is interesting despite another wildly overacted performance from Robert F. Lyons as the villain (I know after my Shoot Out review it might seem like I'm picking on him. The funny thing is, I think he's pretty good once he got older. I like him in *Cease Fire* and *Black Oak Conspiracy*. But when he was younger, he was just terrible).

In *Pendulum*, Peppard to some degree predates the angry abusive cop character drawn to brutality that would become a staple in the seventies. Again, he doesn't quite pull it off, but the picture has some interest before its rotten third act. And his interesting turn in *Rough Night in Jericho* deserved a better picture than *Rough Night in Jericho*. George's quixotic turn is far more successful than Dean Martin's hopeless attempt at villainy. And while he's stuck playing a humorless German in *The Blue Max*, he adds an enjoyable thin slice of ham to his German prisoner of war in *Tobruk*.

But at the end of the day, I think it's his performance as Security Chief extraordinaire Tuxan in *The Groundstar Conspiracy* that's my favorite Peppard performance. And for once, Peppard totally nails the role of the hardass bastard.

The Groundstar Conspiracy is an espionage thriller – a man-on-the-run action movie – a film noir-ish man-with-amnesia movie – except instead of being done à la David Goodis, it's told in a Michael Crichton-ish science fiction vein.

During the film's opening credits, a space science computer research facility called Groundstar is sabotaged by a terrorist/spy. His objective was to break into the master computer and find out the working details of a mini fuel system (McGuffin) that the people who hired him want to sell to either the Russians or the Chinese or back to the Americans again for thirty million dollars (the spy part). As well as blow up the Groundstar facility (the terrorist part).

He manages to accomplish both things, killing six people in the process and blowing his own face practically off. The massive explosion blows the saboteur clear of the facility. The half-dead man makes it to the home of a woman who lives near the futuristic complex, Nicole (Christine Belford), whose doorstep the man with the bloody pulp face collapses on.Enter Groundstar head of security Tuxan (George Peppard, the same year he moved to TV to do Banacek. Tuxan seems like a dry run for Banacek). In Tuxan's position as head of Groundstar security, he

appears to be a man of unlimited power, unchecked authority, armed with an army of operatives and working with an unlimited budget.

The Groundstar project is a joint venture of the Air Force (represented by TV veteran Alan Oppenheimer as a General), the private science sector (represented by TV veteran Tim O'Conner as the scientist) and with the backing of the state senator (James Olson in a nothing part two years after his leading man role in *The Andromeda Strain*). And much to all their chagrin, when it comes to rooting out the saboteurs, Tuxan has jurisdiction over all of them (He considers them all suspects and has them all under surveillance).The saboteur is named Welles (Michael Sarrazin) and despite blowing half his face off, he didn't die. But he does have legitimate amnesia. He doesn't remember committing the terrorist act, killing the six men, the information he took from the computer, who hired him or anything at all about his identity before he came to after the explosion.

The whole film is good. The script by Douglas Heyes, one of the best writers on television, is extremely well-plotted and paced. But the film's first half an hour is the best part. That's the section where Tuxan (Peppard) and Welles (Sarrazin) engage in a battle of wills as Peppard interrogates and tortures Sarrazin to find out what he knows and who he's working for. But while Tuxan is torturing Welles and making his life hell on earth, he's also keeping him alive. The people that hired Welles are trying to either kidnap him to get the valuable information he has or kill him so he won't reveal their involvement.

One of the fun aspects of the film forty years later is how many other movies it seems to pre-date. This section can't help but bring to mind a less grueling Zero Dark Thirty. Welles is a terrorist who killed many people committing his terrorist act in order to sell American secrets to foreign enemies. And Peppard's Tuxan feels as justified as any character in the Kathryn Bigelow film in engaging in any form of manipulation and torture to get the results he's after. He's also one of American cinema's first enthusiastic proponents for unlimited surveillance monitoring of citizens. "If I had my way there would be a bug in every bedroom in America." When he's asked later, "What about privacy?" He answers like a character out of Philip K. Dick, "Murders are planned and committed in private. Plots to overthrow the government are discussed in private. Assassinations are plotted in private."

Since Sarrazin's Welles has no memory of either the incident or his past life, we can't help but sympathize with him; he doesn't want to believe he killed those six men. Teddy Chan's exciting Hong Kong thriller at the beginning of the century, *Purple Storm*, dealt with a similar storyline. A master terrorist who's lost his

recollection and has no memory of his villainous life. It asks a great noir question. Is an evil man, with no memory of the evil deeds he's committed, still evil? In Jack Smight's *The Third Day*, Peppard played that part.

The movie makes it easier to use the word evil because it's not about political ideology, but just a plot to make money (which begs the question, why blow up the facility?). The movie promotes Sarrazin's Welles as the film's protagonist due to his blank slate dilemma and due to the bastardly way George Peppard plays the slightly sinister Tuxan. Sarrazin isn't anybody's idea of an exciting actor, but he brings more than just his cheekbones and pouty lips and mop of gorgeous curly locks to the part of Welles. In the beginning, he holds his own with Peppard (unfortunately in his big scene at the end he turns one note). And after his facial reconstruction surgery, Sarrazin predates his turn as the monster in *Frankenstein: The True Story* when he looks into the mirror at a face, held together by cool looking stitches, he doesn't recognize, "I don't like it!"

What's not to like?

Sarrazin also predates his turn in J. Lee Thompson's *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud*. Like *Peter Proud* (a movie I love) more details of his past life are revealed to him during his dreams. He remembers seeing Grecian ruins and he speaks Greek in his sleep. He remembers a woman in a bikini swimming in water. Then later remembers she drowned (that's almost exactly like Peter Proud).

Peppard's Tuxan wants to find out who hired the saboteur; he even claims he knows exactly who did it, he just needs proof. In an effort to draw out the culprits responsible, Tuxan stages a masquerade of escape for Welles. Now on his own, but unaware he's being tracked by constant surveillance, Welles goes to the last person to see him before his capture, Christine Belford's Nicole, the woman whose door stoop he collapsed at.Not knowing the level of her involvement, he goes to her in the hopes she can shed light on his past. At first, like Redford and Dunaway in *Three Days of the Condor*, he holds her hostage. Telling her, convincingly, "I don't want to hurt you, but I can't be caught." She claims, as she did earlier with Tuxan, not to have any knowledge about his identity. And then, also like Three Days of the Condor, they fall in love and go on the run together.

Unaware Tuxan and his army of surveillance agents are watching their every move.

Belford's character goes from being a hostage to trying to help Welles, to falling in love with him in record time, even for this cliché. In fact, it's so quick that it should

be suspicious, but instead, you know it's just a movie contrivance. They want Welles to have a love interest.Nicole is the one character that the movie, and even Tuxan, takes at face value.Which should be a flaw. And yes, it would be better plotted if there were slightly more suspicion as to her motives. Yet Christine Belford is so charming, and her strange rosso-hued complexion is so striking and she and Sarrazin make such a good couple, that I didn't care how contrived the whole thing was.

The whole movie plays like an early seventies pilot TV movie featuring Peppard's character that somehow found its way in theaters. And according to The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, that's exactly what it was. And you can imagine Universal designing this for Peppard, then getting cold feet due to the nasty nature of his character, then coming up with Banacek. And there are elements of Tuxan that wind up in Banacek. The best episodes of Banacek were always the more fantastical ones. And this movie's ever so slightly science fiction aspect is one of its most stand out characteristics. Is it a science fiction film? I'd say yes, but just barely. But it's the barely part that makes it unique.

Also, in a couple of scenes, Peppard sports the fashions he'd model as Banacek, snazzy suits over turtleneck sweaters. And it's in this movie Peppard would stop putting pomade in his hair and combing it in a half-assed pompadour. Instead sporting the dry look bangs he'd wear as Banacek and for the rest of his career. Also red-haired Groundstar co-star Christine Belford would join Peppard in the second season as a series regular.

But the real interesting thing if *The Groundstar Conspiracy* was intended as a pilot for Peppard's character, is the sinister nature of the character. In the film, Tuxan isn't exactly the villain. But until he flushes out the bad guys, he fills out the role of the antagonist. And it's fun watching Peppard be a bastard master manipulator, pissing every character in the movie off and him not giving a fuck. But when it comes to movie masterminds, he's definitely in the diabolical camp. It's almost as if Cliff Robertson's character in *Three Days of the Condor* wasn't the villain, but the anti-hero co-lead (Peppard is much better in his part than Robertson was in his). Now that character, as the leader of a 'Search'-like science fiction show? That might have been worth watching.

All this leads to the film's big surprise ending. Now Roger Ebert used to say, even a critic revealing that there is a surprise at the ending, is spoiling the ending. Which I agree with, more or less. If I'm paying twenty dollars at a movie theatre, yes I agree. If I'm watching an old movie for free on television, really who fucking

cares? Nevertheless, in the case of *The Groundstar Conspiracy*, Universal advertised the surprise ending right on the one-sheet.

We challenge you to guess the ending of…"The GROUNDSTAR CONSPIRACY"

And yes, the ending is really clever. And I would say it makes this whole movie worth watching. Up until the ending, what was good about the movie, despite its television look, was the cleverness of its plotting, but even more, was the rapid-paced clip that director Lamont Johnson (who's better than this movie) keeps the whole film moving at.It never wears out its welcome. Since I've been analyzing these films, it's a genuine pleasure to watch a picture, even a minor one like this, set course on its destination so swiftly and assuredly.

Lamont Johnson was a helluva talented director (Pauline Kael was a big admirer), and his best movies – *The Last American Hero, One on One, Cattle Annie and Little Britches*, the climax of *The Execution of Private Slovak* – move into your memory and stay in your heart.But this throwaway studio assignment in its own way shows off his directorial skills even more obviously (Excellent use of locations. Creative framing of shots with cool foreground items. A better than usual Peppard and Sarrazin). A lot of Universal contract directors could have made this movie (Jeannot Szwarc. Bernard L. Kowalski. David Lowell Rich. Boris Sagal. Don Weis. Ted Post). But nobody working for Universal at that time could have made it better…except maybe a young Spielberg.

Admittedly, in 1972 the ending was more of a surprise than it is in 2020 after many other films have pilfered the basic idea. Yet, I suspect most viewers will still be surprised at the denouement.

American Graffiti (1973)

Just as the decade of the seventies was getting underway, still trying to shake off the yoke of the late sixties, two nostalgia-oriented memory pieces were released in 1971 that proved tremendously popular with movie-going audiences. Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*, based on the novel by Hud writer Larry McMurtry, who based the novel on his youth growing up in the small Texas town of Anarene during the fifties. And Robert Mulligan's *Summer of '42*, written as a screenplay by Herman Raucher and based on his own youth growing up in the forties.

The story of The Last Picture Show takes place in 1951 in the postage-stamp-size town of Anarene, Texas, and it follows a few of its citizens. Sam the Lion (Ben Johnson), the town patriarch. Lois Farrow (Ellen Burstyn), the trophy wife of the local oil baron. Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman), the lonely wife of the local football coach. Genevieve (Eileen Brennan), the waitress of the town's favorite diner.

But both the book and the film focus on two football-playing high school seniors, Sonny Crawford (Timothy Bottoms) and Duane Jackson (Jeff Bridges) as they chase, court, and fight over Jacy Farrow (Cybill Shepherd), the prettiest girl in Anarene and daughter of the richest man in the county (Burstyn's Lois is her mother).

A description of the plot wouldn't amount to much more than a TV Guide synopsis of an episode of Peyton Place.

Duane and Jacy go on a double date with Sonny and Charlene Duggs (Sharon Taggart).

Sonny starts an affair with the football coach's wife, Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman).

Duane takes Jacy to Wichita Falls for their 'big date'.

Sonny and Duane spend their night together before Duane ships off to Korea. They see 'The Last Picture Show'.

In fact, Peyton Place was a jumping-off point for novelist Larry McMurtry to write the book in the first place. Except instead of the ivy-covered walls, manicured green lawns, and huge oak trees of Peyton Place, you have the dusty, windy, practically deserted Texas town of Anarene, with its limited people living their limited lives. McMurtry writes the book from a more anthropological perspective than most "how I grew up to write the book"-books. Especially a Texas anthropological perspective. As opposed to Bogdanovich's film, McMurtry's novel has a decided lack of compassion when it comes to the citizens of Anarene. It's almost as if McMurtry is saying, I grew up with these people, I know them, and I know they're idiots.

When Peter's film was first released it was greeted as an instant classic. Not the least because it looked like a classic. A problem with shooting period movies in color is the motion pictures' most vivid visual component could turn out to be the ugly colors of the costumes. A problem Bogdonovich avoided by shooting the film in widescreen black and white (it's actually closer to black and grey).

Peter's picture was the first studio film in years to be shot in black and white, not for financial reasons, but artistic ones.

While after Bogdanovich, a few other filmmakers shot feature-films in black and white, but with a few exceptions, Bob Fosse's *Lenny* and Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street*, it was almost always done to better approximate the genre the film took place in. Mel Brooks shoots *Young Frankenstein* in black and white to invoke the Universal monster movies of the thirties. His buddy Carl Reiner shoots *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* in black and white to match up with the forties film noir clips they use. Even Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* uses its black and white photography to invoke New York street classics of the thirties, forties, and fifties, as well as classic boxing pictures like *Body and Soul, The Champ*, and *The Set-Up* (and to make it look different from *Rocky*).

Bogdanovich shoots black and white on *The Last Picture Show* to invoke the period, realism, and loneliness of the story. But on the other hand, it's shimmery monochromatic grey on black photography and classic George Stevens-like framing suggests, like Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner's films do, the trappings of a film genre of another time.

But in this case, it's not an obvious genre like horror films or private detective movies.

The look of The Last Picture Show suggests a prestige Hollywood picture of the fifties (*From Here to Eternity, A Place in the Sun, Home from the Hills*). The exact kind of film you can imagine Sonny & Duane watching at the town's lone movie theatre. And due to both Bogdanovich and McMurtry's old soul quality, the movie actually feels like a fifties film.

Yet the material, while never being explicit, deals with its subject of sexual repression and sexual exploration in an upfront straightforward manner that would have been impossible for a Hollywood movie in the fifties (not a Bergman Swedish film, or an Italian Fellini film, but a Hollywood movie? No fucking way). So while *The Last Picture Show* looked like a classic fifties Hollywood film, it didn't sound like one. When the characters talk about sex it's not camouflaged in euphemisms. In an Otto Preminger film of the fifties, when Jeff Bridges takes Cybill Shepherd to a motel in Wichita Falls to have sex for the first time, they wouldn't have announced what they're going to do (much to Otto's chagrin). But while the characters wouldn't just come out and state that they're going to fuck, Preminger would imply it, and the adults in the audience would know (he hoped) what Preminger intended without it having to be spelled out.

In the fifties, almost everything involving Cybill Shepherd's character Jacy would have had to be camouflaged. But that was Hollywood filmmaking in the fifties.

All the best sellers and the big theatrical dramas of the day got the sex drained out of them when they inevitably received their big Hollywood screen adaptation (*From Here to Eternity*).

So, in its own way, *The Last Picture Show* demonstrated both the freedom of New Hollywood, but also the promise of what post-war Hollywood could have been all along if only Hollywood hadn't decided to be so stubbornly immature.

The Last Picture Show was the critical smash of the year (even more than the eventual Academy Award winner for best picture that year, *The French Connection*) and it did surprisingly well at the box office. While a lot of films in the seventies drew raves from New York and Los Angeles film critics, when they played outside of big cities, they tended to die in the lone small-town movie theatres that Bogdanovich's film is named after. But *The Last Picture Show* had a rural appeal that *Mean Streets* didn't. Garnering eight Academy Award nominations and two wins (Ben Johnson and Cloris Leachman for best-supporting actor and actress).

Nevertheless, it wasn't as popular as the other nostalgia-based remembrance of things past, Robert Mulligan's *Summer of '42*.

Summer of '42 floored seventies audiences in a way the more austere *The Last Picture Show* could never hope to duplicate. The film tells the story of screenwriter Herman Raucher's summer vacation on Nantucket Island in 1942, just as World War Two was heating up for American soldiers. But the young boys vacationing on the Island Hermie (Gary Grimes), Oscy (Jerry Houser, one of the most beloved characters of early seventies cinema), and Benjie (Oliver Conant) have only one thing on their minds, and it isn't the war. The boys, whose age is never clarified, look to be 15 or 16. And at least Oscy and Hermie are bound and determined to leave their virginity behind by summer's end.

No Hollywood film up to that time had ever dealt so frankly with the efforts of trying to get laid. Soon that would become the basic plot of every youth comedy to come out for the next two decades. But in 1971 audiences weren't used to teenagers talking so realistically about sex. And the comedy exploits of the kids fumbling attempts to lose their virginity brought the house down in cinemas all over America. Audiences laughed uproariously at the naughty goings-on on-screen. At nine (when I saw the film) I was only able to decipher so much of Oscy's trim-hunt, but the huge laughter from all the adults surrounding me clued me into the naughty-by-nature hijinxs (later when I found my stepfather's stash of filthy porno magazines, and told him about it, he mentioned that was like the scene in *Summer of '42* when Hermie, Oscy, and Benjie made the same find).

For the first three acts, Mulligan's film is hysterical (then and now). In fact it's so damn funny, little did audiences suspect the gut-punch waiting for them in the film's powerful fourth act.

While on the island, Hermie becomes infatuated with the young bride of a soldier who has gone off to war named Dorothy (radiant Jennifer O'Neill). Dorothy lives in the house she rented with her husband before he shipped out. Like the boys, we never learn exactly what Dorothy's age is (I'd estimate somewhere between 24-26). But one of the reasons we never learn her age, is because in real life Raucher never learned Dorothy's real age, later stating she could have even been as young as twenty. Hermie introduces himself to the young (older) woman and a pleasant friendship develops between them. As he makes himself available to lug groceries from the local grocer to her house. And even stops by to assist her in chores that need doing. All the while harboring a fantasy that it will be Dorothy,

not the other appropriate aged island pinheads, that will be his first sexual experience.

This far-fetched fantasy comes to pass, but in a far different context than the boy could have ever imagined. I'm being cryptic because I want you to see the movie if you haven't already. The slow dance that Hermie and Dorothy share at the climax of the film is quite simply one of the most devastating sequences I've ever witnessed (apparently Kubrick felt the same).

In 1971, while the comedy connected with me, the tragedy flew right over my head. I didn't understand why grown-ups around me were crying. I saw *Summer of '42* twice at the theatres when it came out (and later I saw the sequel *Class of '44* when it was released). But it wouldn't be until thirty-five years later, when I screened a 35mm film print I bought, that I would understand the meaning of the film's ending. I cry easily in movies. But rarely have I wept like I wept while Hermie and Dorothy slow danced to Michel Legrand's incredibly beautiful theme music.

Summer of '42 is quite simply one of the most powerful film experiences I've ever witnessed. And that's with full acknowledgment that Gary Grimes as our young lead is really only okay in the role (he's a far stronger a presence in the sequel *Class of '44*). Jennifer O'Neill was so luminous in her role as Hermie's object of affection, that she parlayed her success in that film to a leading lady career in Hollywood movies that would last till the end of the decade.

And Jerry Houser's Oscy should have made him – if not a movie star – then at least a popular comedic character actor for the next twenty years. The thing that stands out about Raucher's screenplay is how achingly truthful it is. You can believe – more or less – that events played themselves out just the way Raucher claimed they did. He didn't even change the names, Hermie is Herman, Oscy is his best friend Oscar. He kept so much of the story the way it happened, that thirty years later when the film came out and was a hit, the real-life Dorothy saw the film and recognized Raucher's remembrance. Hermie never saw Dorothy again after she left Nantucket Island. But in 1971 he received a letter from her. In a 2002 interview he said; "I recognized her handwriting. But we're talking about 1971, which was almost 30 years after the incident, and I get this letter, and the postmark was Canton, Ohio, and she had remarried. And, interestingly enough, she was worried about what she had done to me and my psyche. And her last sentence was: 'The ghosts of that night 30 years ago are better left undisturbed.' She didn't want to tell

me who she was. (But) she was a grandmother. She had remarried. I hope she's still out there. I've never heard from her again."

Raucher's screenplay, initially, wasn't meant to focus so much on the story of Dorothy and Hermie, but instead be a tribute to his best friend Oscy Seltzer – who was killed in action in North Korea in 1952. But the writer in Raucher realized the incident with Dorothy was the real ending of his movie. Because the film was a hit, Raucher was able to write a sequel, Class of '44, that sees the two young men enter college, and eventually sends Oscy in uniform off to his doom overseas. Class of '44 is pretty terrific, even though it can't really compete with the first movie's devastating climax, or its initial sexual humor. In fact, the weirdest thing about the sequel is it doesn't really end, it just suddenly stops.

But where the film scores is in the more mature rendering of Hermie and Oscy (Benjie's disposed of almost immediately). Grimes' performance in the first film may have been standard-issue, but between Summer of '42 and Class of '44, Grimes had starred in a few movies, including a very good seventies western The Culpepper Cattle Co., and even in movies alongside John Wayne and Lee Marvin. So by the time Grimes encores his signature role, it's a much more mature and confident actor at the helm. And as good as Houser was in the first film, he's even better in the second one. Herman Raucher's desire to honor his childhood best friend is beautifully realized in the film's dramatic climax. Which just consists of Oscy in uniform, ready to ship out overseas in the morning. And the two buddies spend one last night together getting drunk. The devotion that Raucher feels for his long lost friend (Oscy died a hero) makes this sequence one of cinema's greatest statements on male love. When a drunken Oscy falls out of the passenger seat of a parked car, crumpled on the asphalt, laughing at himself, you realize that this is probably Raucher's last vivid memory of his old chum.

Heartbreaking.

God knows how many movies have been made that followed the template of boys in various eras trying to get laid. And almost all of them followed the Hermie (the sensitive boy) and Oscy (the more raunchy sexually wised one) dynamic. Even when Garry Marshall's TV series Happy Days first came on the air (before Fonzie took over), it copied the Summer of '42 dynamic, with Ron Howard's Richie filling the Hermie role, and Anson Williams' Potsie channeling Oscy (I'm sure Williams was cast due to his slight resemblance to Houser). One of the most successful Israeli movies ever made was Boaz Davidson's *Lemon Popsicle*. Which basically told the same story of the three boys (the exact same types as Summer of

‘42) trying to get laid, only the Israeli film took place in the early sixties, and it didn’t have a Dorothy character. But the film was so successful that there really isn’t any Israeli that hasn’t seen it. So I’m showing my Israeli fiancée my groovy 35mm print of Summer of ‘42. And about halfway through I remember the similarities between *Lemon Popsicle* and *Summer of ‘42*.

So I bring it up to her as she’s watching. And my fiancée (now my wife) said; “Really? You know, I was just thinking, this is sorta like *Lemon Popsicle* if *Lemon Popsicle* was a real movie.”

But it was three years later when George Lucas would make the nostalgia piece that was to define the seventies, *American Graffiti*. The film deals with a group of teenagers on the last night of summer in 1962. Even though it was the sleeper success of *American Graffiti* that kicked off the whole wave of fifties nostalgia that threatened to overwhelm the entire decade, Lucas’ film was set in ‘62. Even though on the outside the early sixties just looked like The Fifties Part 2, underneath changes were brewing. The big cities had all moved on. But small towns, like the one in American Graffiti, we’re able to exist in a bubble – at least until Kennedy was assassinated.

While the movie has a great cast of girls, director Lucas makes it abundantly clear, when it comes to narrative, he’s only following the boys (Richard Dreyfuss, Ron Howard, Charles Martin Smith, and Paul Le Mat). Best buddies Curt (Dreyfuss) and Steve (Howard) are leaving their small hometown of Modesto California in the morning to fly to college back east. So the college that Curt and Steve are supposed to fly off to represents more than just a normal rite of passage for the two young men. The college represents the growing consciousness of the sixties that exists beyond the Brigadoon-ish town they’re escaping.

But Curt (who is Lucas’ stand-in, he wants to be a writer, and when he grows up he will write American Graffiti) is ambivalent about getting on the plane in the morning.

He’s starting to think he might not go.

Of all the characters Curt is clearly the most intellectual, so then why is he hesitating going off to college? Usually the budding writer in these types of stories can’t leave their hometown fast enough. But Curt’s ambivalence suggests he’s a deeper sort than just a cocksure kid full of piss and gage who can’t wait to jump ship on his old hometown. Curt’s not really questioning going to college. He’s

questioning the idea of leaving all the people he's ever known. But even more than the humans he leaves behind, Curt's questioning leaving the rituals of community that the young people of Modesto partake in.

Hanging out at Mel's – the curb service diner that is the starting point of every youth in town's weekend night. Mel's where the burgers are juicy, the shakes are thick, the neon is pink and green, the music is rock and roll, and the fancy faced waitresses in colorful uniforms wiz back and forth on roller skates, balancing trays of burgers, fries, and milkshakes. Hanging out at high school dances, that even though he's graduated, he could probably get away with for another year without looking creepy.

What sets Dreyfuss' Curt apart from his peers and the rest of the cast, is he's the only one who realizes how temporary these rituals are. Curt knows if he gets on that airplane tomorrow morning – everything that the film so nostalgically celebrates – he can kiss all that goodbye. The town and the life he leaves, won't be the town and the life he returns to. If he even does return, which in all likelihood, he won't. Curt seems to know once he leaves he's not coming back. Curt knows the boy who exists today will no longer exist even two years from now. That's why he's contemplating staying too long at the party. But Lucas balances Curt's resistance with the cautionary example of Big John Milner (Paul Le Mat). Milner is the guy who stayed too long at the sock hop. Milner acts and lives as if it's 1958. He's a few years older than the other boys. Big John chooses to hang out with kids who were probably freshmen in high school when he was the big shot senior, instead of contemporaries from his old class. He continues to cruise the boulevard on cruise night and try and pick up high school girls. He continues to live off the reputation he created for himself in high school (the fastest drag racer in town). And Lucas gives him a dandy of a dilemma. A new guy in town, Harrison Ford's Bob Falfa, who's gunning to dethrone the king and take away the only thing Big John has left…his reputation.

This is a neat twist on the high school football star who always planned on going pro but didn't have the talent to go all the way, and lives in the glow of former gridiron glory.

In the sequel, *More American Graffiti*, we learn Big John Milner does move on to be a professional drag racer. His storyline in the sequel follows his attempt to secure sponsorship for his racing team and his attempt to romance a beautiful Norwegian girl who speaks practically no English, who he just met. The romance is light, yet meaningful since we in the audience know that Milner will die later

that day. Maybe Big John will never experience life, but at least he can experience love.

As Bob Dylan sang, 'The Times are a Changing', but in the first movie Milner rejects even the small changes that have occurred in Modesto so far. When Mackenzie Phillips' Carol asks him; "Don't you think The Beach Boys are boss?" Big John proclaims; "I hate all that surfin' shit. Rock and roll ain't been worth a shit since Buddy Holly died."

American Graffiti made George Lucas a directorial superstar and for good reason. Like a lot of great nostalgia pieces (*Meet Me in St. Louis, Summer of '42, Cooley High, New York New York, Dazed and Confused*) it seems to get better the further it gets from its original release date. With The Last Picture Show Bogdanovich and *Ben Hur* cinematographer Robert Surtees' (father of 'King of Darkness' Bruce Surtees) silky black and white photography had the effect of draining every modern aspect out of the movie. And in Summer of '42, the cinematographer (again, Robert Surtees, in the same fucking year!) doesn't just do a great approximation of fifties Technicolor (like Gordon Willis will later do in September 30, 1955), he actually shoots it in Technicolor (if you haven't seen Summer of '42 projected in an I.B. Technicolor 35mm film print, you haven't seen Summer of '42).

But George Lucas goes the other way when it comes to capturing his memories on film. Lucas invokes the candy-colored pop ephemera of the fifties in his visual scheme. The green hues of the fluorescent bulbs that light the liquor stores, hamburger stands, and pinball arcades that the characters loiter around. The bright colors of the jukeboxes, diner neon signs, and the candy apple red and canary yellow of the hot rods that cruise up and down the main drag. Lucas poignantly parades all this in front of us with the added knowledge that all this glorious chrome and paint and pomade is about to go out of style and be replaced by space-age sixties chic.

George fills Graffiti with one clever stroke after another. One of the strokes that helped make the movie tremendously popular was the wall-to-wall fifties rock and roll soundtrack that can be heard in the film from beginning to end. Usually emanating from various car radios. Including – in this radio soundscape – the voice of all-night dis- jockey Wolfman Jack, who acts as the film's de facto narrator. Lucas didn't invent the radio soundscape. Bogdanovich used it and used it vividly in his first two movies *(Targets* and *The Last Picture Show*), as well as in his new picture that year of '73, *Paper Moon*.

Writer/director Floyd Mutrux would also make the radio soundscape his own in all of his pictures (*Dusty and Sweets McGee, Aloha Bobby and Rose, American Hot Wax,* and *The Hollywood Knights*). And also the same year as American Graffiti, Martin Scorsese will create a jukebox soundscape emanating from the Little Italy cocktail lounges and pool halls in *Mean Streets*. But the reason every new movie featuring young people from 1974 to the present features a wall-to-wall soundtrack of pop tunes (not to mention a soundtrack album collection of hits) is due to the influence of *American Graffiti*.

But even more important to the success of the movie than all that boss radio was the fact that the whole movie takes place during the course of one night. And the film concludes when the sun comes up, Milner races Falfa, Curt finally talks to the blonde in the white T-Bird (Suzanne Somers), and then finally, boards the airplane (minus Ron Howard's Steve) that will whisk him away from Modesto forever. Personally, I think Curt always knew he was going to get on that airplane. He just wanted it to be his idea and not some pre-ordained destiny. His wandering around all over town all night was just Curt's way of saying goodbye.

Many other films would come along that tried to duplicate American Graffiti's one-night structure, telling a story with a gang of characters, and then cross-cutting back and forth between them all picture long. But in other films, the different pockets of characters were usually given proper storylines. But the different vignettes of the shenanigans the Graffiti gang gets into never really rises to the level of story. It just poses different questions to the audience about what will or will not happen to the different characters as the night progresses.

Who's the girl in the white T-Bird?

Will Curt finally meet her?

Will Curt leave in the morning?

Will Steve and Laurie (Cindy Williams, who may give the strongest characterization in the whole film) break up?

Will Big John beat Bob Falfa?

Will The Toad get lucky?

At the end of the night, what will Candy Clark's Debbie do? (Debbie really deserved a closing crawl wrap-up, but the sequel More American Graffiti provided Debbie with a '67 Haight-Ashbury future).

All these vignettes play great, and the film seamlessly cross-cuts between all of them. However, the one that's the least convincing is Curt's encounter with the street gang The Pharaohs.

It's the only part of the movie where you feel that the screenplay is going out of its way to create hijinxs for the character. Even the comic vignette of The Toad trying to buy alcohol outside a liquor store seems organic to both the movie and Toad's rite of passage.

But the whole gag where the cop car loses its wheels, today, seems contrived (it doesn't help that a dozen other movies have copied it verbatim). Now if George Lucas is reading this, I'm sure his response would be; "Sorry, Quentin, if you didn't care for that gag, but more than any other thing you've mentioned, that gag was the reason we were ultimately able to sell the movie and was an audience highlight."

Fair enough.

In 1973 the audience needed that big laugh at that moment in the picture. And the TV spot that sold the picture to audiences really needed it. That gag isn't my problem with The Pharaohs section. My problem is the outrageous miscasting of Bo Hopkins as Pharaohs gang leader Joe.

No don't get me wrong, I'm a huge Bo Hopkins fan. And I don't just mean in Peckinpah films. I love him in White Lightning (for my money the best country-fried co-star Burt Reynolds ever had), The Nickel Ride, Posse, A Small Town in Texas, and Tentacles. And during a brief moment in the seventies, when it looked as if Hopkins might pull off a transition from interesting young character actor to interesting young leading man (it was mentioned by some he possessed 'a McQueen quality'), I was rooting for him and was disappointed when he drifted back into supporting character roles once again (In one of his arcane pop culture references, Dennis Miller once referred to him as, 'The Poor man's Jerry Reed!"). But in American Graffiti the entertaining performer is the one blatantly false note in the picture. The reason Hopkins seems so out of place (aside from the fact he looks like he's thirty-five) is it's pretty fucking obvious Joe was written to be Latino. The rest of the gang are Latino (or look Latino at least). What's cool about

The Pharaohs sub-plot, is after watching all these Northern California white boys drive up and down the street in cars their parents (probably) helped them buy, The Pharaohs represent (in what I think is a Hollywood studio movie first) Low Ryder culture.

The film's whole cast spends most of their time cruising in cars. And it's almost cute how squeaky clean they are (their form of juvenile delinquency involves water balloons and cans of shaving cream).

But as soon as we get in the car with The Pharaohs, out comes the reefer and the forties of malt liquor, and they start riffing and talking shit like it's Boulevard Nights.

But what the fuck is thirty-five-year-old, blonde hillbilly Bo Hopkins doing in that car?

Jesus Christ, he looks more out of place than Richard Dreyfuss does.

I suspect George Lucas was persuaded to make the leader of the gang white so as not to have the only featured minority in the cast be a hood. But the scene when Dreyfuss' Curt is in the back seat of The Pharaohs car has a definite racial element to it. It's not just that The Pharaohs are from the wrong side of the tracks (the town seems too small to have different tracks or two competing High Schools). When Curt is trapped in the backseat of their car it's obvious he doesn't belong there. And not just because he's not a street gang type or a tough guy, it's because he's white. What saves the scene is Dreyfuss' bemused reaction to being kidnapped.

Well, if nobody is telling me that I'm being kidnapped, I don't really know for sure if I am being kidnapped.

Well…rather than know for sure, let's just pretend I'm hanging out with these guys because I want to.

However just because I think Bo Hopkins doesn't work in American Graffiti, I don't really blame him, it's Lucas and casting director Fred Roos' fault for making such a disastrous casting decision (I'd love to know who the second or third choice was? Sylvester Stallone? Henry Winkler? How about Pepe Serna? Or Rudy Ramos? No, hilllbilly Bo Hopkins was absolutely the perfect choice). But I'm happy to report – as a lifelong Bo Hopkins fan – that Hopkins' character shows up in the sequel during The Toad's Vietnam sequence. And in that setting, Hopkins redeems the miscasting of the first film.

I Escaped From Devil's Island (1973)

Part of the legend of Martin Scorsese is the story of him screening his Roger Corman produced movie *Boxcar Bertha* (his first commercially produced theatrical feature) for his mentor John Cassavetes. However, despite the fact he acted in many of them (*Devil's Angels, Machine Gun McCain, The Incubus*), Cassavetes had contempt for exploitation pictures. After seeing the film, John said to Scorsese, as nice as he could, "*Kid you just spent a year of your life making a piece of shit."* Then John clarified, *"Look, don't get me wrong, it's fine for what it is. But you don't want to get caught up doing these sleazy exploitation flicks. Leave those for the other guys, you're better than that."*

Now at the time, while Scorsese had ambition, I don't think he thought he was *that much* better than that. One, he didn't look down on those type of pictures the way Cassavetes did. Two, he admired Roger Corman and welcomed his mentorship (in *Mean Streets,* Scorsese includes a scene where the guys go see Corman's *The Tomb of Ligeia*). And three, he was just thrilled to be making movies. After his first Independent film, *Who's That Knocking At My Door*, he was thrilled to be making movies people might actually *see.* He had another picture already set up with Roger's brother Gene Corman. But Cassavetes talked him out of that project with Corman, and into getting his ass in gear and finish writing *Mean Streets*. Which is what he ended up doing, and as they say, *the rest is history.*

But the film he didn't do for Gene Corman and United Artists was pretty good too, *I Escaped From Devil's Island* starring Jim Brown. When faced with finding a new director for his picture, Gene Corman decided not to go with one of his brother's promising protégées. Instead, he chose an old salty dog he admired who he'd worked with before, someone who'd been directing pictures since 1937: None other than the great William Witney (aka *Wild Bill Witney*).

For Gene, Witney had directed a nifty little 20th Century Fox picture titled *Valley Of The Redwoods (1960)*, that Gene, himself, thought was one of the best pictures he ever made; he told me so. Witney was one of the greatest directors of action cinema in the history of the business. And Corman knew it. He pretty much created (along with stuntman extraordinaire Dave Sharpe) the modern movie fistfight. He came to it by observing one of his hero's sets – – Busby Berkeley! – – and how Berkeley choreographed his dance sequences. And from watching the way the cinematic dance king covered the action with different camera set-ups, Witney figured the same technique might very well work for a fistfight. And, voila, the

Hollywood donnybrook was born; the way Witney and Sharpe devised it is still the way we shoot fights to this day. Before he passed on I asked Burt Reynolds about working with Witney who directed him on a few episodes of his fifties TV series *Riverboat,* with Darren McGavin. Burt said, "*William Witney worked under the assumption that there has never been a scene ever written that couldn't be improved by adding a fistfight."* He continued: *"You'd do a dialogue scene, then Bill would yell, 'Cut cut cut! You guys are putting me to sleep.' Then he'd point at me and say, 'Okay you talk to him for a bit, then you punch him.' Then he'd point to the other guy and say, 'Well that makes you mad so you punch him back. And now we got a scene!' "*

The title of Bill Witney's *first* autobiography says it all, "*In A Door, Into A Fight, Out A Door, Into A Chase"*. If Witney hadn't been under contract to Republic Pictures (and Witney was definitely a company man), he should've shot the fifties version of Rex Beach's often filmed novel *The Spoilers*. Imagine: What Witney could have done with the massive climactic throwdown between Jeff Chandler and Rory Calhoun? Like Don Siegel and Sergio Corbucci, Witney had a real capacity for filming screen violence, in both his own work as well as shooting second unit action on other people's movies.

He shot the exciting battle in Republic Pictures' Alamo movie, Frank Lloyd's *The Last Command* (The one with Sterling Hayden as Jim Bowie) and the thrilling stagecoach robbery in my favorite Allan Dwan picture, the offbeat *Woman They Almost Lynched.* And, more historically, in Chapter 8 of his serial *Zorro's Fighting Legion* (most serial fans' nominee for greatest serial ever made), he precedes the Yakima Canutt riding on-top-of-the-lead-horses-pulling-the- stagecoach, then-falling-under-their-hooves-as-the-coach-and-horses go-over-him stunt in John Ford's *Stagecoach* in the same year (1939). And with Yakima Canutt! The story: when Ford was prepping *Stagecoach* he got together with his stunt gaffer Canutt and asked him to come up with a really spectacular stunt for the film. Canutt told Ford about a real humdinger he'd just done for one of Bill Witney's serials (Ford knew who Witney was because everybody at Republic knew Witney. Not only that Pappy's actor brother Francis Ford worked regularly for Witney. Ford had Republic screen the footage for him and Canutt).

When Ford saw the footage he was gobsmacked. Once Ford and Canutt stepped out of the screening room, he asked the greatest stuntman who ever lived could he do the same stunt with two more horses. And that's how one of the most famous action scenes in movie history came to be (Till the day he died, whenever Witney

referred to great directors, the two examples he always used were: John Ford and William Wyler).

Easily the most violent movies ever made for children were made by Witney (I say that as a badge of honor; get 'em while they're young). That would include many of his serials: *Drums Of Fu Manchu, Spy Smasher, Dick Tracy Returns*. *And* especially *The Adventures of Captain Marvel,* which easily contains in Tom Tyler's Captain Marvel, the most homicidal berserker superhero of cinema. (Most of the gags and set pieces that Spielberg restages for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* are taken from Witney's chapter plays).

When Republic Pictures heard the kids at the Saturday afternoon matinees thought Roy Rogers was getting soft, they brought Wild Bill Witney in to toughen him up.

A standard Witney directed dust-up in a Rogers picture left all involved with bloody noses. The climactic fight at the end of *Twilight in the Sierras* includes *an* amazing bullwhip battle that leaves both Roy and the picture's heavy as striped as tigers. And his Roy Rogers film *Eyes of Texas* (after Witney's *The Golden Stallion* Rogers' best film) is viciously violent for a film made for the Saturday afternoon kiddie matinee crowd (the film's female heavy wields her power through killer dogs).

When Witney started making movies for adults in the fifties, he came up with a classic: the Macdonald Carey western *Stranger At My Door*, which includes the most amazing and terrifying breaking-the- unbreakable-horse sequence in the history of western cinema, including *Monte Walsh.* Witney became so renowned in the industry for this sequence that when he started directing western TV shows, he was usually brought in to helm *their* breaking-the-unbreakable-horse episode.

His 1958 World War II combat picture *Paratroop Command* is the best of American-International's WW2 potboilers. But I think it's even better than that. It contains a realism that sets it apart from most other WW2 movies done in that same era. So much so that it makes a lot of good and similar movies from that same time, Robert Aldrich's *Attack* and Don Siegel's *Hell is for Heroes*, look theatrical and stagey by comparison.

Characters perish in ways closer to real combat than the normal Hollywood pecking order. And it includes a very realistic and suspenseful crossing-the-minefield scene. To compare it to *Platoon* might be stretching it a bit, but only a bit. Because Witney spent as much time in World War II as Oliver Stone

spent in Vietnam and not making movies with the Mark Harris bunch, but fighting. And there's the film that first turned me on to Witney: *The Bonnie Parker Story*, which presented the bank-robbing duo of Bonnie and Clyde (here called *Bonnie & Guy?*) *as much* closer to the mad dog killers they were. Even including one of their most famous murders, that of a policeman they shot during a traffic stop, that the Arthur Penn film ignored.

Witney's film not only predates Benton and Newman's script for *Bonnie and Clyde*, *but* it also manages to predate David Lynch's *Wild At Heart* as well (even including *Flame Dissolves*).

Interestingly, while *I Escaped From Devil's Island* is a strong picture, and a cruel picture, it isn't necessarily a violent one. The idea behind the film was to beat the massively budgeted Steve McQueen Devil's Island epic *Papillon* to cinema screens, which it did by a month (a few years later *Two-Minute Warning* would do the same thing to *Black Sunday*).

Now Franklin Schaffner's epic *Papillon* is a pretty iconic film for boys my age who saw it when it came out or later on television or in the eighties on video. The film is very involving. It contains maybe McQueen's finest serious acting moment on film, when he sticks his head out of the solitary confinement door and is not only unrecognizable but completely deranged. And the film contains one of the most powerful time cuts I've ever seen in a motion picture.

The film's *also* not a little pretentious, self consciously arty, unrelentingly grim, extremely grueling and except for Dustin Hoffman keeping a bankroll and an extra pair of spectacles up his ass, completely devoid of any entertainment value. Qualities it shares with *The Revenant,* so much so Iñárritu's film could be titled *Papillon Part 2.*

In a way, a grueling affair like *Papillon* being presented by its studio as a massive commercial epic encapsulates the era of seventies filmmaking better than any other example (I own Steve McQueen's personal 35mm print of *Papillon* that includes twenty extra minutes. I joke it's twenty extra minutes of Steve McQueen close-ups).

While *Papillon* is the better film, there's a case to be made that Witney's *I Escaped From Devil's Island* is the more *interesting* film. The script by talented episodic TV writer Richard Adams, who also wrote the superior Jonathan Kaplan-directed Jim Brown heist flick *The Slams,* is both entertaining and rather complex (I mentioned

to Scorsese how much I liked the script and he said, *"I know, I was going to do it"*).
The film's three lead characters, Jim Brown's *alpha male* Le Bras, Christopher George's *pacifist* Davert and especially Rick Ely's *fancy boy* Jo-Jo are refreshingly complicated and three dimensional (the fourth member of the team, James Luisi, is his usual snarling one-note bore).

But what really distinguishes this version of the Devil's Island tale from *Papillon and Strange Cargo* and all other versions of the French penal colony story, is the exploration of the societal dynamics of the community that the island prisoners exist in. And this is most profoundly felt inside the prisoner subculture of *The Fancy Boys*, as seen in the effeminate homosexual young men who doll themselves up (as best as they can) as women, and prance around driving the *muy macho alpha male* prisoners wild with desire. Talented Rick Ely plays *Fancy Boy* representative Jo-Jo, the film's third lead.

The Fancy Boys aren't presented the way the queer population is usually depicted in novels about Alcatraz or other prison-set seventies adventures.

Which is to say, they're not a degraded marginalized subculture (*Six Against The Rock, The Onion Field*) or a source of buffoonery (*The Longest Yard, Penitentiary*). Nor are they made up of *fresh fishes* brutally butt fucked until they're turned into *prison punks*.

On the Devil's Island of *this* movie, The Fancy Boys hold their own respected status inside of the island convict community without degradation. They're respected both as individuals and as the group they represent. And are coveted objects of desire among the convict population. Neither do The Fancy Boys hide behind their more macho island dwellers. One scene shows The Fancy Boys, led by Ely's Jo-Jo, administering their own form of straight razor retribution against a transgressive inmate. Unlike John Guillermin's detective story *P.J.* starring George Peppard, where private detective P.J. (Peppard) enters a late sixties era gay bar and is beaten to a pulp by a bunch of clichéd pastel pantsuited pansies. Or the killer queers in the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever.* Or pencil-thin lady-boy Christopher Morley in *Freebie and The Bean* beating the tar out of macho Freebie (James Caan) in a Candlestick Park men's room (it's an ugly homophobic scene in an otherwise excellent and – – ironic – – take off on fascist-cop movies. Having said that, Christopher Morley is still kind of an amazing presence).

In those three above examples, having the effeminate male characters commit violence against the straight masculine male genre hero is done as a reverse on a reverse. In those cases, it's presented as comic hilarity (*Diamonds Are Forever*), grotesque surreal absurdity (*Freebie and the Bean*) or both (*P.J.).*

By contrast, old Hollywood pioneer William Witney presents The Fancy Boys' retribution surprisingly straight. The scene's meant to be *wild*, but not grotesque or ridiculous. You're actually meant to be on The Fancy Boys' side.

But what's really *wild* is gridiron Mr. Macho, in both movies and real life, Jim Brown's character Le Bras' relationship with Ely's Jo-Jo. They're not lovers, but if Le Bras was stuck on this island for the rest of his life, it's not out of the question they could have been. The two men share a genuine camaraderie. Brown's Le Bras likes and respects Ely's Jo-Jo, down to giving him a respectful epitaph once he exits the picture. Now, this would be considered progressive in *any* seventies action movie. But for the audience that this film was intended for it's downright jaw-dropping.

Starting at the end of the sixties, Hollywood started fashioning Jim Brown as the sexy, surly, smoldering alternative to Sidney Poitier's upright leading man (or as Brown said in the Spike Lee documentary about him: *"Sidney was the nice guy."*). During that time Brown starred in, or was an important cast member of, quite a few studio features. With some of them being pretty good, obviously *The Dirty Dozen*, but also *Dark of the Sun, Riot, Ice Station Zebra, The Grasshopper,* and his best performance at that time, *…tick… tick… tick…* .Even in the films that didn't work, *100 Rifles*, *The Split* and *Kenner*, Brown's still solid. *100 Rifles* mediocre final product still seems like a shamefully wasted opportunity (*I mean Jesus Christ, how do you fuck up a movie starring Jim Brown*, *Burt Reynolds* and *Raquel Welch?*).

I asked Burt Reynolds how he felt about working with Brown? He said: "*I loved him! The biggest straight shooter I ever worked with. If Jim Brown told you the sky was brown, then I guess the sky musta' turned brown, because Jim said it.*"

Yet none of Jim Brown's mainstream Hollywood movies (save *The Dirty Dozen)* really clicked commercially. The then exploding blaxploitation market was beckoning him to join the parade. And after a touch of resistance on his part, he finally said, *fuck it*, going over to American-International Pictures to make his first film in that vein, *Slaughter!* The Jack Starrett-directed *Slaughter* was the Jim Brown starring smash all those other movies were supposed to be. And from that day forward Jim Brown became that genre's biggest superstar (as popular as Fred

Williamson was, he was always number two). And following Slaughter came a string of movies where Jim Brown played *a badass motherfucker! Slaughter's Big Rip-Off*, *Black Gunn*, *The Slams* and *Three The Hard Way* where he starred with the other two most popular male stars of the genre, Fred Williamson and Jim Kelly. And when that film played in black neighborhoods it was one of the biggest cultural events of the decade (I watched it once on a Sunday afternoon on television in the Los Angeles County Jail lock-up).

In 1972 my Mom was dating a black professional football player. So in an effort to get in good with her, he wanted to hang out with me. He asked her: Does he like football? She said: No, he likes movies. So he took me to my *first* movie in a black theatre in a black neighborhood. The film was Jim Brown's brand new movie *Black Gunn (*the radio spot proclaimed: *Jim Brown's gonna' git the motha' who killed his brotha'*). And frankly, I've never been the same since. To one degree or another, I've spent the rest of my life trying to recreate that experience of watching a brand new Jim Brown movie on Saturday night in a black cinema in 1972. The closest experience I ever had with a white audience at that time, was how they reacted to Sean Connery's James Bond in *Diamonds Are Forever* and Clint Eastwood as *Dirty Harry. Still…there was no comparison*. When Jim Brown sat behind his desk and Bruce Glover (Crispin's father) and his other white gangsters threatened Jim Brown's *Gunn,* and Gunn hit a button and under the desk a sawed-off shotgun dropped in his lap…the jam-packed cinema of black males cheered in a way the ten-year-old little me had never seen in a movie theatre before. At that time, living with a single mother, it was probably *the most masculine experience* I'd ever been a part of. And I remember as the movie ended with a freeze-frame of Jim Brown as *Gunn,* the guy behind me proclaiming out loud: "*Now that's a movie about a bad motherfucker."*

I Escaped From Devil's Island wasn't intended to be a blaxploitation movie. The initial idea was to beat *Papillon* to the punch at the box office. Nevertheless Jim Brown was the biggest star of that black action movie genre. And once it was done, United Artists sold it primarily to Jim's black male audience base and the film did well enough when it came out. But it played for years and years as a second feature on Times Square and at urban grindhouses and on the lower half of drive-in double and triple features. And *that* black male audience that the film was primarily sold to was notoriously homophobic. So I'm sure the reaction to the Le Bras and Jo-Jo dynamic (which includes a scene where Le Bras *pretends* to have sex with Jo-Jo) among audiences of Watts and Compton and Inglewood and Oakland and Harlem and Detroit must have been positively *incendiary.* In retrospect, it's both surprising and gratifying that Jim Brown was down with such subversive tinkering of his

persona. There are black male stars today that *refuse* even a hint of sexual ambiguity for the very same reason. They don't think their audience can handle it. And all of this is doubly surprising that it's William Fucking Witney – *King of the Serials – Roy Rogers auteur* – at the helm.

And Wild Bill Witney wasn't done yet. His last film is a ridiculous satire about an all-black female motorcycle gang called *Get Down and Boogie.* It takes on a certain racist Kentucky Colonel who's masterminding a diabolical plot to control the black community through his franchise of fast food rib joints (so far the only cinematic treatment of the rumor in black folklore that popular brands in the black community like Church's Fried Chicken and Marlboro cigarettes are secretly owned by The Ku Klux Klan). And in one of the last days of a directing career that spanned constant shooting of film since the mid-thirties Bill Witney wrapped it up by shooting The Dramatics singing *Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get*!

The Mack (1973)

Even though Martin Scorsese decided to turn down exploitation assignments from Roger Corman he wasn't completely divorced from him. After being prompted by John Cassavetes to quit Corman and do something personal – "Don't you have anything you want to do?" – Scorsese said, "Yes I got something. But it's not ready it needs a rewrite." "Well what are you waiting for, rewrite it!", Cassavetes prompted. So along with Mardik Martin, Scorsese conceived the script that would turn out to be Mean Streets. And when Scorsese was finished, his first stop was Roger Corman (he probably used the Xerox machines at New World to make the copies).

Roger read the script and responded, but with a Corman caveat. Roger's brother Gene had just produced a successful picture at MGM titled *Cool Breeze*, where they took John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* and remade it with black characters (MGM and George Armitage would do the same thing with Mike Hodge's *Get Carter* turning it into *Hit Man* with Bernie Casey).

So Roger's brainwave du jour was turning white crime films into black crime films. Roger says, "If you're willing to swing a little and make it black, I'll give you 150,000, you can shoot it in New York." When I asked Scorsese about Corman's offer, he told me he told Roger, "Let me think about it, meaning I really said no, but even then I said let me think about it."When I pressed him, "did you contemplate it," he told me, "Well I said let me think about it, knowing in the frontal -whatever- lobe of my brain was saying absolutely out of the question. I said hold on a second, but I realized there was no way I could do it black. There's no way."Again I pressed, "You never considered what black actor you would've cast as Charlie, for instance?""No." Marty replied flatly. Continuing, "There was nothing – I just couldn't do it. I could not make the leap."Now if Scorsese just wanted to make a good gangster story, he could've made the leap.

But the gangster aspect was just the genre the film fell in, not the reason he wanted to make it (for instance I could've done a black *Reservoir Dogs*. I wouldn't have put a black guy amongst those guys. But I could've made the whole team black). Scorsese wanted to make a movie that showed New York Italian-Americans as they were. As he (Scorsese) knew them. So if twenty years from now, people want to know what the guys he grew up with were like, they could watch *Mean Streets.* And if it came into town and opened and closed like a lot of small movies did at that time (*Dealing, The Christian Licorice Store, Been Down So Long It Looks Like*

Up To Me),then he could go back to Roger Corman and make Women in Prison Films.

So okay, Scorsese didn't consider it. But…I'm going to consider it. He bends a little, accepts Corman's offer and turns Mean Streets black. What would that movie be? Imagining Mean Streets without the Italian-American milieu is like imagining a white *Sounder*. I mean, you can imagine it, but it does seem beside the point. You don't watch either one of those two movies for the story. Losing the people and the social fabric feels like you've lost the movie. And once you break it down to simply the story minus the milieu, you realize you've seen that movie before.And besides, there already was a "Black" Mean Streets (like there was a "Black" *Shampoo*) done in the very same year.

Michael Campus' *The Mack*.

And while Campus' film didn't receive a rave review from Pauline Kael in The New Yorker or make Vincent Canby's top ten list of the year in The New York Times (however Ralph Bakshi's Heavy Traffic did), it performed far better at the box office than did Mean Streets and for the audience it was made for, proved every bit as iconic if not more so.

Shaft, Superfly and *Uptown Saturday Night* had more mainstream success. *Slaughter* had better action. *Coffy* and *Brotherhood of Death* were more fun. But even including its flaws, *The Mack* is the best and most memorable crime picture of the whole blaxploitation genre.

Like Mean Streets did with its posse of Little Italy hustlers, The Mack takes the viewer on a tour of a closed-to-the public subculture.In the case of the Campus picture, the pimping game in Oakland California. Along with actor Max Julien, the real auteur of The Mack was screenwriter Bobby Poole (who wrote the script to star himself). Poole takes Ben Hecht's script for *Scarface* and reworks it from Chicago bootleggers in the thirties to Oakland procurers in the seventies. The film tells the tale of Goldie (a fantastic Max Julien), an ex-con who through the mentorship of two individuals on opposite ends of the trade is introduced to the Mackin' game and how it's played. One, a blind pimp known as The Blind Man (Paul Harris expertly channeling Iceberg Slim) and two, a former-friend, current working girl Lulu (Carol Speed). The film follows his violent bloody rise to the Top of the Heap (another title from that time period). Along with Julien the film is filled with terrific actors, Richard Pryor, Roger E. Mosley, Dick Anthony Williams,

William Watson, George Murdock and not-so-terrific ones like Steve McQueen's pal Don Gordon.

The picture contains dialogue so memorable ("You'll have so much money, it'll look like your pockets got a case of the mumps." "Shut the fuck up when grown folks are talkin'."), that four different generations of black men have been quoting it for the last forty years. Visceral lurid violence ("Stick yourself!") that has the snap of a Holloway House trash paperback (Where's the Donald Goines novelization?). Its predatory pimp psychology is presented as Jungian philosophy ("Anybody can control a bitch's body, but a mack can control a bitche's mind."). And like Ron O'Neal's pusher hero Priest in Superfly both his lawlessness and his opportunism, usually at the expense of his own community, is presented as a nonconformity. Real-life Oakland pimps and pushers like Frank 'a man' Ward and his brothers hang out in the corners of the frame, and in the hilarious barbershop sequence take center stage. The producers made a deal with Frank Ward (the one real true king of Oakland crime) that opened up the production to all the authentic bars, barbershops and nightspots that give the picture its documentary-like verisimilitude. And the actors playing the pimps, Julien as Goldie, Pryor as Speed and Dick Anthony Williams as Pretty Tony stand up remarkably well to the real thing (the biggest difference is the actors are more handsome and have better diction). Despite the fact the film's story is taken whole from Scarface and a dozen other rise-and-fall gangster sagas, both the milieu and subject matter contain such a new-to-the-movies vitality (especially in 1973) that the familiarity with the structure helps more than it hurts. You don't have to guess what's going on or why Goldie does what he does. You may have never been in this world before, but you've seen this story before.

Almost every character is an afro-centric variation on a white archetype from thirties gangster stories. Juanita (*Imitation of Life*) Moore is the Baptist version of the long-suffering Italian or Jewish mother of the protagonist who acts as the son's conscience. Don Gordon and William Watson are the white racist version of the crooked cops out to bring down the tragic hero. Roger E. Mosley plays the black nationalist version of the hero's priest brother in a Warner Brothers movie. The familiarity keeps you grounded. But Bobby Poole uses our familiarity with the story to pull off the film's biggest surprise. Unlike *Scarface*, Cagney in *The Roaring Twenties* or *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*, Goldie doesn't fall. He ascends to a triumphant freeze-frame finish after being crowned Mack of the Year.

In Mean Streets Harvey Keitel's Charlie toes the line with his uncle mob boss Giovanni (Cesare Danova) and Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) gets a bullet in the

neck for crossing that line. Both Scarfaces (Tony Camonte & Tony Montana) meet bullet-riddled finales.But Bobby Poole's Goldie blows up his rivals (Pretty Tony), offs the mob boss (George Murdock), kills the cops (Gordon & Watson) and even makes The Man in Oakland Frank Ward come in second for Mack of the Year at The Players Ball.

By the time The Mack would open theatrically Frank Ward would be dead.

Maybe Goldie did that too?

Showdown (1973)

George Seaton's last film falls into that category of 70's westerns that acted as a dated counterpoint to the rough violent anti-westerns of its era *(Cheyenne Social Club, Chisum, Cahill U.S.Marshall, The Good Guys & The Bad Guys* and *Rio Lob*"). As well as that interesting list of last films during the 70's of once popular directors of earlier eras (Hawk's *Rio Lobo*, Wyler's The Liberation of L.B. Jones, Jerry Lewis' *Which Way To the Front*, George Stevens *The Only Game In Town*). However when it comes to that cluster of clunkers, *Showdown* is a very likable entry.

The story of this western is nothing new. Two former friends, Rock Hudson & Dean Martin, are pitted against each other when Martin robs a train, unaware that his old buddy Hudson has been elected sheriff. Since it's Seaton's follow up to his massive hit *Airport*, and his penchant for over ambitious projects (*The Hook, The Confederate Traitor* and *What's So Bad About Feeling Good*) the slightness of the whole project is surprising. But along with the pairing of Hudson & Martin, who share the screen for the first time, it's the film's low-key modesty that ends up being one of its most charming features.

In my opinion of all the fifties He-man leading men that were still starring in movies in the seventies (Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, Glenn Ford, Yul Brynner and Robert Mitchum), Rock Hudson was hands down the hippest (Tony Curtis with his paisley scarfs and new flamboyant attitude was second). Check out Hudson in Roger Vadim's Pretty Maids All In A Row and Phil Karlson Hornets Nest. And while Showdown is defiantly anti hip, Hudson is touchingly solid in his role. Once Rock moved to TV to do *McMillan & Wife* he turned bland. But before that, in all of his 70's movies, *Maids, Nest, Darling Lilli, Embryo* and the mini series *Wheels* (which paired him with Fred "The Hammer" Williamson) he's terrific.

Dean Martin, on the other hand, by the time of *Showdown* had become a joke. After watching a drunk Dean stumble through the Matt Helm movies or leering at *The Golddiggers* on his TV show, you really couldn't take him serious anymore. Making his performances, especially in westerns of that era, *5 Card Stud, Rough Night in Jericho, Bandolero!*, and *Something Big*, slightly ridiculous. However even though his performance is his usual light comic touch, Martin blends in better here then he does in those other westerns. Possibly because he's too old for his role, there's a touch of pathos in watching him try to pull off the same devil may

care charm he coasted on for the last twenty years. But also there's genuine sweetness in the chemistry between Hudson & Martin.

While *Showdown* is a light western, it's not necessarily a comedy. Yet Seaton has always had a talent for injecting high comedy into his movies. And in *Showdown* a comedy scene smack dab in the middle between Martin & Hudson and a better then usual Susan Clark brings the whole film up to another level. And the way you feel about Hudson & Martin at the end might even raise it a touch higher than that. My review might be a touch generous. Yet Seaton, Hudson, Martin and the whole film possess a sweetness that inspires generosity.

A Man Called Tiger (1973)

At one time before Bruce Lee decided to go his own way with the self-directed "The Way of the Dragon" (U.S. Title : "Return of the Dragon"), "A Man Called Tiger" was to be the third Bruce Lee / Lo Wei vehicle after "The Big Boss" & "Fist of Fury". However, except for the opportunity it would have allowed Bruce to wear the snazzy garish seventies fashions he seemed to prefer in real life, this doesn't seem like a natural fit for The Little Dragon. But as the Wang Yu vehicle it became, it's one of the star's most beloved films (At least in the west due to its theatrical release by World Northal and the early Embassy Home Video release), and one of his most violent movies (and for Wang Yu, that's saying something).

Wang Yu plays a Chinese stranger in Tokyo, who Tony Montana-style moves his way up the Japanese Yakuza ladder. The reason he does this isn't to be a successful gangster. It's to find out who's responsible for his father's murder. However, Wang Yu doesn't fake being a gangster. He *is* a gangster, shaking down stores for protection money, beating up people, and moving up the ladder by being more ruthless and violent than anybody else.

After becoming China's first action hero with the seminal "One-Armed Swordsman," and even starring and directing Hong Kong's first fist fight film, the great "Chinese Boxer" (no wuxia swords, only fists), by the early seventies Wang Yu's popularity was beginning to decline. Mostly because Wang Yu wasn't a real martial artist (he was just an actor) and he was starting to be surpassed by men (and women) who could fight better. Namely Bruce Lee. Wang Yu responded by subtly making his movies a little more action oriented, and a little less martial art specific. Turning himself into "The Steve McQueen of Asia" as he was dubbed at the time. In the film "The Dragon Flies," his only English language western set picture, he was rechristened *Jimmy Wang Yu*, which admittedly is more fun to say.

The movies in this Steve McQueen phase of his career pretty much all consist of Wang Yu acting cocky, talking shit, and kicking a lot of dudes' asses. Which, minus all the intrigue, (At one point Wang Yu has four different women working for him, none of which know about the other), is a pretty good description of this film. But part of this Steve McQueen persona was the complete ditching of the almost pious characters he played in his earlier pictures. Not to mention his wonderful innocence in the first "One-Armed Swordsman" film that deservedly made him a superstar. To be replaced by an arrogant son of a bitch, who talks shit to your face, in front of your minions, as he pops peanuts in his mouth, before he slaps you across the room. A bastard who makes such an impression kicking your

ass, your boss not only doesn't avenge your treatment, he hires Wang Yu, and makes him *your* boss. And no film better demonstrates this Jimmy Wang McQueen style then "A Man Called Tiger" (naturally there's nobody in the movie called Tiger).

Lo Wei's film has a lot of attractive elements. Chief amongst them being its Japanese Yakuza milieu, which gives it a very different look than any other Hong Kong martial art film of this period. Wang Yu doesn't go into full on Chinese avenger mode till about halfway through the picture. So the whole first half is a straight up Chinese made Japanese Yakuza flick. In fact with its Yakuza setting, Wang Yu's bounding performance, and fights that turn into bloody mayhem, it's much closer to a Sonny Chiba picture of the era. I bring up Sonny Chiba because the number Wang Yu does on both rival Yakuza gangs, all to clear his father's name, is as bad as if Sonny Chiba's Terry Tsurugi (his great antihero character from "The Streetfighter" movies) had been hired to break up both gangs.

The whole revenge for my father routine is a soft cock idea, only put there so Wang Yu's unlikeable character seems more sympathetic. But there's nothing sympathetic at all about this guy, he's a real fuckin' bastard. In one scene Wang Yu, in a "Mean Streets" – like red lit bar, busts a bottle on the bar and grinds the broken end in one of the gang's face, as he lays out his threats. And like Chiba's Terry Tsurugi, what we (the audience) like about him is we don't like him. In fact in his ruthlessness, if not his wit, he actually reminds you of the savage plots Simon Templar would hatch in Leslie Charters *The Saint* novels, especially "The Saint in New York" (always more of a bastard, and more deadly in the novels then in other media interpretations). Also, with its emphasis on the crime film aspect, it can't help but bring to mind Italian Sergio Martino's directed Luc Merenda policer/mafia pictures. It even has a halfhearted Martino-like car chase (a rarity in Kung Fu flicks of the day).

For most of the movie it looks like a Japanese Yakuza film, plays like a Italian gangster film, and has the fight every ten minutes pace of a Hong Kong chop socky pic, until suddenly, without any proper set up, we find ourselves into the beginning of the film's extended climax. The climax revolves around a gambling table sequence, involving the same dice game they play in "God of Gamblers" (with a lot of the same fancy dice in cup flair), between the two different set of villains and a high roller played (very well) by director Lo Wei. Wang Yu sits back as a spectator for most of the game. Having the films two villains face off against each other in a suspenseful gambling scene is a fresh idea. And Lo Wei commits to staging this sequence for all it's worth. You actually feel the pace of the film shift

from a fight every ten minutes chop socky flick, to a slower, more serious dramatic storytelling rhythm. This gambling scene (which at one point actually manages to get all the film's characters into the same room) eventually, after much suspenseful intrigue, leads to the film's bloody climax, where a bunch of goons attack Wang Yu with axes and hatchets. And as opposed to most films, the axes often times hit their target, spraying blood all over the screen, the set, and Wang Yu's wardrobe. All ending with a magnificent slow motion final kick to head, that's as good as I've ever seen. When it comes to bloody mayhem, it's on par with the climax of DePalma's "Scarface" and the Candyland shoot out in my "Django Unchained".

The Dynamite Brothers (1974)

In my film *Kill Bill*, during The Bride's final confrontation with Bill, she makes a reference to an imaginary list of impossible things that could never happen.And she mistakenly puts, "(Bill) busting a cap in her crown right at the top of the list."

Well on that same list of impossible things that could never happen, right above that,would be grade Z filmmaker Al Adamson making a watchable movie. But due to the urging of my friend, Elvis Mitchell, I've just discovered for myself Adamson's Hong Kong Kung Fu-Blaxploitation hybrid, *The Dynamite Brothers*. And low and behold it's a damn good seventies shoestring grade Z little picture. And believe it or not, it contains some of the best fights in a low budget seventies American made martial arts movie (an admittedly low bar when the competition is crap like *Velvet Smooth, Death Promise, Kill Squad*, and Leo Fong Pictures).

The Dynamite Brothers was made in 1974. But it didn't play in Los Angeles till 1976, and when it did it played under the title *Stud Brown*, and sold completely as a Slaughter-like blaxploitation flick. During the week of its engagement, they played wall-to-wall radio spots on the most popular soul music radio station in LA, 1580 KDAY.

This ebony and jade two-hander stars Hong Kong leading man Alan (Bloody Fight) Tang and third-tier blaxploitation star Timothy (Nashville) Brown. Tang plays Larry Chin, a fresh off the boat illegal immigrant in Los Angeles searching for his long lost brother. Brown plays a black stud named Stud Brown. Stud has just served three years on a bum rap. And when we first meet him, he's handcuffed to and being escorted back to jail by crooked honky cop Burke (played by the great Aldo Ray in one of his best alcohol-fueled performances in a skid row production). Chin gets apprehended by Burke on Sunset and Vine right behind the Cinerama Dome and Kentucky Fried Chicken stand that was there for years (and according to Bob Murawski just up a little from the BBQ joint that Al Adamson owned). Burke handcuffs the black man and the Asian man together, and then Brown and Chin make a break for it Defiant Ones-style into the Hollywood Hills.

The story hops back and forth between Chin's efforts to locate his brother (Chin is also plagued by red-filtered flashbacks of his late wife's death years earlier). And Stud Brown's efforts to help his old buddy The Smiling Man (played by a not bad Don Oliver), a pimp and neighborhood activist (What?) who's trying to stop Asian crime kingpin James (Blade Runner) Hong from flooding the neighborhood with heroin (pronounced by Hong as 'hero-ine). Our two heroes run all over LA,

looking for Chin's brother, trying to avoid Hong's murderous henchmen, dirty cop Burke (firmly inside Hong's pocket), and Hong's deadly right-hand black man, straight razor-wielding Razor Jay (played by Adamson regular Al Richardson who dresses like Sammy Davis Jr. circa 69-74. Turtlenecks with big ass round medallions hanging off his neck).

During their adventures the two fugitives meet a couple of love interest cuties. Chinatown restaurant hostess Clare (Ralph Bakshi's Fire and Ice) Nono, who like Faye Dunaway in Three Days of the Condor, starts off her relationship with Chin as a hostage, then graduates to helping him out. And Brown hooks up with blaxploitation icon Carol (Abby) Speed, playing a pearl necklace wearing mute prostitute that Stud falls head over heels for. After Stud Brown learns she's mute, the next shot shows them walking down the street holding hands, all lovey-dovey, with him talking her ear off as she listens silently. A sister who can't talk back, but loves listening to a brother who blathers on and on (a black male fantasy if ever there was one).

During their adventures, we're treated to some surprisingly effective exploitation high points. Kung Fu fights, machine gun shootouts, car chases and crashes, explosions and plenty of female extras showing plenty of sub-porn nudity. And best of all an extremely funky soul music score by Charles Earland, that's the film's single greatest asset (Elvis Mitchell contends it's the most underrated score, along with *The Final Comedown*, of the blaxploitation genre). Two Satan's Sadists-like sadism filled torture scenes (an Adamson staple), over the top cheap gore (another staple), a very cool *Day of Anger* style opening credit sequence (Bob Le Bar's title sequences were consistently the best thing about most Independent-International releases), a couple of really impressive stunts (a high-speed motorcycle transfer to a speeding car will make you sit up straight), and this time around, courtesy of John (Black Heat) D'Amato, a not bad script. As opposed to most Al Adamson productions you actually might find yourself giving a fuck about how it all comes out. There's a late frame surprise I didn't see coming. Even Chin's reason for searching for his brother is not what you expect. And towards the end, there's a set piece with a cool twist. Al Richardson's character Razor Jay, interrogates Carol Speed's mute character with his straight razor, not realizing she's mute (Bitch, do you want me to cut your face up?). It goes from funny, to tense, to finally disturbing.

As a native Los Angeles resident, one of Adamson's most charming characteristics, even in his awful pictures, was his commitment to cheap, run and gun, no permit location shooting all around LA and Hollywood. Giving viewers a good glimpse of

long since closed, burger stands, cafes, soul food restaurants, and nightclubs (one cafe in the flick sports a sign on the side of the building that sweetly reads; Where good friends come to meet). Al Adamson's films and other junk efforts by his contemporaries (Rudy Ray Moore, Leo Fong, Jack Hill, Greydon Clark, Matt Cimber) for Los Angeles location lovers are the best photographic record of when Hollywood turned into Hollyweird.

Aldo Ray, the patron saint of all washed-up former stars, gives his last no-apology good Aldo Ray performance. This is the type of seventies skid row production he specialized in during this time. Nevertheless, you can tell Ray realized this was better than most of the dreck that he normally appeared in, and a much bigger role then he was normally trusted with. And he appropriately rose to the occasion. Soon afterward his drinking would get so bad that he could only appear in one or two scenes per picture because that was about as long a film production could keep him off the sauce.

The black actors who prop up the jive portion of the pic, do their part in keeping the flick lively and the dialogue repeatable. Alan Tang and Timothy Brown do such a good job together you wish they filmed a sequel. Tang was an old school Kung Fu film leading man in flicks like *Bloody Fight* and *Bloody Finger*. As well as appearing in nineties Hong Kong Heroic Bloodshed movies like Return Engagement and *Requital*.

Timothy Brown, who was so classically chiseled he looked like the guy who belonged on the Afro Sheen box, who hopped back and forth between some real low-class exploitation films, *Sweet Sugar, A Place Called Today, Bonnie's Kids*, one of the crappy Ginger flicks and more legit productions like Robert Altman's *Nashville* (he played the Charley Pride-esque black country and western singing star). He also played Fred Williamson's character, "Spearchucker" Jones, from the movie *M.A.S.H.* on the first six episodes of the TV series ("Spearchucker" Jones was a main recurring member of the gang along with Hawkeye and Trapper John in the Richard Hooker M.A.S.H. novels). But during those six episodes Tim Brown was a relaxed presence who legitimately held his own with Alan Alda and Wayne Rogers. It's a damn shame his character disappeared. It could of really been meaningful for the TV show M.A.S.H. to have an important black male member of the gang.

Timothy Brown existed on the third tier of blaxploitation stardom. Jim Brown, Fred Williamson, Pam Grier, and Jim Kelly were on the first tier. Due to their iconic roles, Max Julien, Richard Roundtree and Ron O'Neal were on the second

tier (which probably also included Bernie Casey). Tim Brown belonged to the far lower budget third tier, with three other guys who looked just like him, James Iglehart (star of Cirio H. Santiago's Filipino flicks like *Bamboo Gods and Iron Men, Savage* and *Death Force*), *The Candy Tangerine Man* and Black Shampoo himself John Daniels and The Black Dragon Ron Van Clief. The very next year Adamson would star Brown in his blaxploitation follow up *Black Heat* with Russ Tamblyn (not as good TheDynamite Brothers, but still kind of fun).

Al Adamson himself would continue in this blaxploitation/Kung Fu vein for his next few pictures. The already mentioned *Black Heat* (which would be cobbled together from an earlier picture titled *Girls For Rent*), *Mean Mother* starring recording star Dobie (Drift Away) Gray inexplicably billed under the name Clifton Brown? Then two awful flicks with Jim Kelly. The ultra cruddy *Black Samurai* and the even cruddier (but strangely more watchable) *Death Dimension* (featuring our old friend Aldo Ray in a scene).

I was never really a Jim Kelly fan, but even I felt sorry for him ending his film career in Al Adamson junk. Yet when it comes to The Dynamite Brothers Al Adamson's junk works just fine (Adamson's Nurse Sherri is pretty good too). And the film's last frame manages to provoke a feeling unique in Adamson's filmography. As Alan Tang and Timothy Brown move off to start their next adventure, the film freeze-frames both men in mid-flight. It's at that moment you realize not only did you enjoy this little picture, but you also wish Tang and Brown had done a sequel. On a list of impossible things that could never happen, Al Adamson leaving you wanting more! That has to be right at the top of the list.

The Lords of Flatbush (1974)

The first time movie audiences got a taste of Sylvester Stallone's voice as artist (writer/actor) wasn't 1976's *Rocky* but 1974's *The Lords of Flatbush*. A low budget New York independent film directed by Martin Davidson, who would go on to have a nice little filmography that would include the like minded *Eddie & The Cruisers, Hero At Large* (my favorite), *Almost Summer* (which enjoys a very very small cult following amongst devotees who saw it when it came out) , and the William Petersen & Sissy Spacek nineties romantic comedy *Hard Promises* (which apparently, only I alone like), and his co-director Stephen Verona, who would go on to direct the ill-fated Gladys Knight starring feature film vehicle *Pipe Dreams*, which co-starred her predator ex-husband (any interview Ms.Knight gives, goes over her trials and tribulations with her Pipe Dreams co-star named Barry Wilksomethingorother.).

"The Lords" of the title are a (very small) group of four Brooklyn street toughs, Stallone's Stanley (hands down the biggest and the meanest), Perry King's Chico (the motorcycle riding Casanova of the crew), Henry Winkler's Butchie (the smart aleck of the group , and the one Jew amongst three Italians), & Paul Mace's Wimpy (the little guy and the most authentically New Yorker of the group. You can spot Mace hanging around with the other junkies in Jerry Schatzberg's *Panic in Needle Park*).

The film follows their lives and loves (really only Chico & Stanley) in Doo Wop era fifties New York. The film was made for nothing but then (miraculously) picked up for distribution by Columbia Pictures, where it was paired with the fifties time capsule wonder *Let The Good Times Roll* (one helluva concert film, and apparently 70mm prints of it exist). The reason Columbia picked up this obviously shoestring New York production and slapped their grand lady with the torch logo on the front of it was, it was a pretty good film.

The success of *American Graffiti* precipitated a large wave of unfounded romanticized fifties nostalgia that at one point threatened to engulf the entire decade, and that I, as a little boy who didn't know any better, was especially susceptible to (back then I loved anything fifties and prided myself on my fifties trivia knowledge). During this tsunami-like wave of nostalgia came "Oldies" based radio stations, the "Oldies But Goodies" series of albums, other fifties hit collection records sold on tv (most people my age first learned who Chubby Checker was from these commercials), James Dean was reintroduced to the pop culture zeitgeist , i.e. you could buy his posters in head shops again, right next to

Tim Curry's Frank N' Furter (after a fall from grace during the hippy sixties), *The Wild One* replaced both *On the Waterfront* & *A Streetcar Named Desire* as the seminal Brando film (again, those were the pictures and posters they sold in head shops). And on tv, the American Graffiti inspired situation comedy "Happy Days" (lest we forget Ron Howard starred in both), and then later it's feminine opposite number "Laverne & Shirley." And last but certainly not least, the ascendancy of Henry Winkler's Fonzie to the schoolyard pop culture stratosphere (to this day his black leather jacket hangs in the Smithsonian).

Well some sly shrewd fox over at Columbia noticed that not only was *The Lords of Flatbush* fifties based like *American Graffiti*, but it also had Fonzie in the cast, before the industry knew that was a big deal, but us school kids knew that was a very big deal. So even though Henry Winkler didn't really have a tremendous amount of screen time, Columbia Pictures cut together a terrific tv spot that featured Henry Winkler's footage (Fonzie's drawing power among young school kids was no joke), and THE BEST and MOST CATCHY commercial jingle ever written for a movie tv spot (while the original song score by disgraced songwriter – movie director Joseph Brooks is fantastic, the tv spot theme is no where to be found in the movie), that I can sing perfectly to this day.

All this made the movie both a hit and a very fondly remembered artifact of its era (both the era it depicted the fifties, and when the movie came out and later played on The ABC MONDAY NIGHT MOVIE, the seventies). And like *American Graffiti* before it, and *Dazed & Confused* after it, it had a cast of young actors of its era who would go on to distinguish themselves in the future. Obviously, both Stallone & Winkler, but also the lovely and talented Susan Blakely (who was almost unbelievably beautiful back then) who starred with Nick Nolte & Peter Strauss in the first of the official novels for television "Rich Man, Poor Man", and in my opinion the better Francis Farmer movie. And Perry King, who for awhile had a string of feature film leads in interesting movies like *Mandingo* & *The Possession of Joel Delaney* & *The Choirboys* & *A Different Story,* till by the eighties he was wearing Hawaiian shirts and drinking out of coconuts on tv's "RipTide."

Actually, the story goes King was a replacement for the role of Chico. Originally Chico was played by a young Richard Gere, three years before his breakout role in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. And, apparently, Stallone & Gere hated each other so much that Stallone kicked his ass, and then Gere either quit or was fired. Not only that, the grudge between the two carries on to this day, to the point some speculate it may have been Stallone behind the famous Gerbil Rumor that painted Richard

Gere a laughing stock for over a decade. Another humorous element of Stallone's "Lord's Legacy," after super producers Chartoff & Winkler (no relation to Henry) read the Rocky script and fell in love and wanted to do it, they were told they had to do it with the author as the lead. Which they said; "Well, what has he done before?" Stallone's agent said, he's the lead in The Lords of Flatbush. So naturally they screen The Lords of Flatbush and are completely besides themselves with excitement about the actor and his potential to play a great Rocky……. because they think Perry King is Sylvester Stallone!

Now watching *The Lords of Flatbush* when it came out was an interesting (in retrospect) experience. Not least of which because it was the first time I was introduced to the New York independent low budget film esthetic. Before I saw *Mean Streets*, I saw The Lords… (and gritty as it was, Mean Streets had a bit of Warner Brothers gloss, even if it was just they could pay for Rolling Stones songs). Before I saw Claudia Weil's *Girlfriends*, I saw The Lords…, before I saw Jim Jarmuch movies, I saw The Lords, before I saw *Smithereens*, I saw The Lords. And I liked it, and my friends liked it. Though we all felt a little gypped that Fonzie didn't have more to do.

But the film's cast was excellent, along with who I've already mentioned, there was DISCO's court jester Paul (Thank God it's Friday) Jabara, the beautifully annoying Renee Paris as Chico's disposable sex partner (even that's too romantic a description for what she is), and best of all the GREAT MARIA SMITH as Stanley's long time, long suffering, but ultimately triumphant girlfriend, Franny. And in many ways to this day, Smith remains Stallone's best screen partner. I wouldn't be surprised at all to find out he originally wrote the role of Adrian in Rocky for Smith. As good as everybody is (and like I said, Joe Brooks faux fifties song score is dynamite), it's Stallone & Smith who dominate the movie. Stallone not only dominates the screen as Stanley, he wrote or rewrote many of the scenes he's in, earning him that long ago banished from The Writers Guild credit Additional Dialogue. And frankly anyone familiar with Stallone's witty street smart dialogue can tell. Especially the films two best scenes. One, a very Brandoesque scene by a rooftop pigeon coop between Stanley & Chico. And the other, a scene that is not only the best scene in the film, but a classic scene in early seventies cinema. Stanley's (Stallone) fiancée Franny (Smith) lures him into a jewelry store to purchase an engagement ring for her that the poor slob clearly can't afford. What follows is a scene so real & so hilarious, and so obviously has Stallone's writing finger prints all over it, it could charm the pants even off of an eighties left wing Rambo-hater.

Doe doddie doe doe The Lords of Flatbush is a moooviedoe doddie doe doeabout how life was in the fiffififtiesa drive in movie, a rumble or twodoe doddie doe doea black leather jacket and a greasy hair dewrecord hopsBobbie socksstealin' a carmakin' lovemakin' outa black padded braaaaaaDoe doddie doe doeThe Lords of Flatbush is something to seedoe doddie doe doeit brings back memories for you and for mei don't mean to boast, but you'll dig it the most!the Lords of Flatbush Flatbush Flatbushrated PG.

Daisy Miller (1974)

The American "Post Sixties Anti-Establishment Auteurs" in the late sixties and throughout the seventies tried their hand at adapting great works of literature, or theatre, or works by great authors.

Mike Nichols with Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* Joseph Heller's *Catch 22,* and Jules Feiffer's *Carnal Knowledge.* Frank Perry adapted Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays.* Arthur Penn did Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man.* Paul Mazursky did a modern-day Shakespeare adaptation of *The Tempest* & Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story.* Hal Ashby adapted Woody Guthrie's *Bound For Glory.*

Richard Rush's magnum opus was Paul Brodeur's darkly comic novel of paranoia *The Stuntman.* And Richard Lester's magnum opus would be his brilliant adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' The Three Musketeers (which I believe is one of the greatest epic productions *ever made).*

And their non-American counterparts would go even further, John Schlesinger would adapt Thomas Hardy & Nathanael West. Roman Polanski would adapt Shakespeare & Thomas Hardy. Franco Zeffirelli would do both *The Taming of the Shrew & Romeo and Juliet.* Milos Forman would adapt Ken Kesey & E.L. Doctorow, and Ken Russell would do his Ken Russell number on D.H. Lawrence & Aldous Huxley (not to mention all those pseudo biopics of great composers).

However when *The Movie Brats* (so named by Michael Pyle's book length analysis of them) adapted novels they leaned more towards popular fiction that they thought would make good movies (*The Godfather, Jaws, The Last Picture Show, Carrie, Paper Moon, The Fury).* This would start changing in the eighties and nineties, when *Scorsese* would adapt Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence,* Spielberg would adapt *J.G. Ballard & Alice Walker, and Coppola* would tackle Bram Stoker. Paul Schrader would adapt *Mishima* and direct Harold Pinter, and De Palma would fall on his face and never really get up again after fucking up Thomas Wolfe.

But back in the seventies the only one of *The Movie Brats* to tackle classical literature, was Peter Bogdanovich's adaptation of Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (*yes I know Michael Pyle didn't include Bogdanovich as one of The Movie Brats. Well, I do).*

The film starts off a little bizarre. The tone at the beginning is a little off-putting. You're not quite sure if it works. But the film gains power as it progresses, and builds to a gut punch ending. Bogdanovich's *Daisy Miller* is very funny, yet it leaves the viewer remarkably sad as you watch the final credits fade up. What sets the film apart from *Far From The Madding Crowd, or Tess, or The Age of Innocence* or the whole *Masterpiece Theatre* vibe of most classic literary adaptations is Bogdanovich's approach. The movie plays like the entertaining and breezy classic adaptations that came out of Hollywood in the thirties and forties, *Garbo's Anna Karenina & Camille, Ronald Coleman's A Tale Of Two Cities, Laurence Olivier's Wuthering Heights.*

Part of the reason for this is Peter tackles the material in a similar way that you can imagine Howard Hawks dealing with the assignment in the forties. Bogdanovich's *Daisy Miller* goes for and achieves a rapid-fire pace of overlapping *Hawksian comedic* rhythm to the dialogue. Peter even makes it for the same reason Hawks would of made it. Not because he's overly reverential to Henry James' book, but because Henry James' book offers a great star vehicle for *Cybill Shepherd (you can imagine Hawks doing it with Rosalind Russell or Frances Farmer).*

It's true Bogdanovich did overestimate Cybill Shepherd's talents. But one of the talents Shepherd *did* possess was a facility with rapid paced comedic Hawksian dialogue. Shown off to good effect in both *Daisy Miller* and the non-singing parts of *At Long Last Love, as well as the* Albert Brooks scenes in *Taxi Driver,* and *Ivan Passer's Silver Bears,* leading to her spectacular eighties comeback on the TV show *Moonlighting.*Shepherd is completely convincing as Daisy Miller. But not convincing like a classic actress playing the role (*Olivia de Havilland in The Heiress),* which is what we're used to when we usually watch classic literature dramatized.

By Bogdanovich turning the whole story into one that turns on fast-paced comic repartee, he leans the material into Shepherd's strengths. But it seems Bogdanovich also went for a duality of character and actress. Like the cheeky innocent Daisy is in over her head in high society expatriate Rome, Cybill Shepherd is in over her head in this lavish period production. But Shepherd, like Miller, rises to the occasion.Shepherd shares with Daisy her delight in slight inappropriateness, her sarcastic sense of humor, and her ability to manipulate men to act out her whims.She also possesses Daisy's American "*fuck You, Jack"* rebellious streak, what use to be called, *moxie.* It's Daisy's American *"fuck You, Jack"* quality that makes her reject *Mrs. Walker's (Eileen Brennan)* demand to fall in line and get in

her society coach. It's a decision that effectively ends Daisy's life in English expatriate Roman high society, and ultimately leads to her death.Shepherd demonstrates that same American *"fuck you, Jack"* spirit by taking on Henry James' heroine in a lavish starring vehicle for herself directed by her boyfriend.Both Miller and Shepherd share a consequences be damned type of moxie. But where the moxie in Daisy leads to tragedy as the story progresses, Shepherd, after a settling in period during the first fifteen minutes, grows into the role (even Pauline Kael begrudgingly admitted this. Something you could never imagine her doing for others of Shepherd's ilk like Ali McGraw or Candice Bergen).

In Bogdanovich's telling, Daisy's fate is sudden, and we have an emotional reaction to both its abruptness, and its callousness. And that reaction is earned by Cybill Shepherd's affinity with Daisy Miller. The ending leaves us shocked and sad at its conclusion over the fate of a character you're really never sure you liked. The conclusion also contains a real-life sad resonance. And that's the sad fate of the film's male lead *Barry Brown,* playing the American *Frederick Winterbourne,* who chases after Daisy and tells her story to us.

Barry Brown was a young actor who emerged in the late sixties – early seventies, popping up on *Mod Squad & Ironside,* and small parts in movies like *Philip Kaufman's The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid.* He was also, along with *Jeff Bridges and Rob Reiner,* one of the fraidy-cat white kids bussed to the scary black high school in *Paul Bogart's Halls of Anger.*

He was an *Andrew Prine-type* of young leading man. Skinny, handsome, sensitive, and soft. A male ingénue. But in 1972 *Robert Benton* cast him opposite *Jeff Bridges* in his western directorial debut *Bad Company.*

Brown and Bridges proved a great team. Bridges, all rawboned American boy masculinity, and Brown, his sensitive and intellectual counterpart.Then Bogdanovich cast him as *Winterbourne* in Daisy Miller, the film's real lead, and *our* witness to Daisy's comings and goings. Peter had his problems with Brown (mostly due to alcohol), but no matter, it's still one of the finest performances in all of Bogdanovich's filmography.Shepherd's biggest hurdle is fighting against her natural modernness. But that's okay, because to the world that Daisy Miller tries to cavort in she's considered outlandishly modern, when *modern* wasn't considered a *good thing.*But Shepherd partly gets away with it because Barry Brown, along with Eileen Brennan, is the most era appropriate actor in the film. He enters the movie like he stepped out of a *Chagall* painting to start the story. A painting he will return

to when the story's over.We watch Daisy yank Winterbourne's leash, and we watch him hop. We watch him try to breathlessly keep up with Daisy and never quite succeed.We watch him be enchanted by her liberated spirit…till he's not.And then we watch him betray her.And it's only in that final end shot that the loss and the cost of that betrayal is felt so devastatingly by both us and Winterbourne.

What did it all mean?

What was Daisy to him, and what will she be?

Will she just turn into a story he tells? How will Daisy fare in that story? Who will Winterbourne be in that story? Is Winterbourne the only one, save her mother and her brother, to care enough to tell Daisy's story?The question Barry Brown's performance asks the audience to contemplate is will Winterbourne be haunted by his encounter with Daisy Miller? Or will her memory become insignificant over time?

After Daisy Miller, Brown never received any more leads in Studio movies (but he is the star of a tremendously entertaining ski thriller directed by *Robert Butler* called *The Ultimate Thrill,* that we've shown in the past at The New Beverly and will show again in the future). But for the most part Brown returned to television in the late seventies doing guest shots on TV programs like *Barnaby Jones & Police Woman.* And he makes a cool appearance in *Joe Dante's Jaws rip off* for *New World Pictures Piranha.*Then, the year of that film's release, at the age of twenty-seven, Barry Brown took his own life. Turning all of us who liked Barry Brown, when we watch the end of Daisy Miller, into a bit like Winterbourne.

Who was Barry Brown?

What did it all mean?

Am I the only one who remembers Barry Brown?

Am I enough?

Manhunter (1974)

No, not the 1986 Michael Mann serial killer thriller based on Thomas Harris' "*Red Dragon*". But the 1974 Quinn Martin produced TV movie about a bounty hunter who hunts thirties era gangsters. Ken (**White Shadow**) Howard plays *David Barrett,* a Marine veteran returning home from World War I to his family's small farm in the midst of the Great Depression, in what looks like it's supposed to be Kansas. The family and the farm have fallen on hard times in David's absence. Their farming equipment has broken down, with no money to pay for new parts, they can't sell their crops, and have been reduced to burning corn cobs in the potbelly stove instead of coal.

His former sweetheart *Susan* (Mary Cross) is now happily married to the town's sheriff and is a mother of two. She also works at the small bank located in David's hometown. Accompanied by his faithful dog *Buck*, David visits Susan at the bank to try and secure a loan for the farm, suddenly in walks the Fedora-wearing, Tommy-Gun brandishing, *Frank Clinger Gang*.

The notorious bank robbers are led by snarling *Frank Clinger* (Gary Lockwood) and his sister *Ann Louise* (Stefanie Powers), obvious surrogates for *Bonnie & Clyde*. To make the couple a tad different the movie makes them bother and sister, as opposed to lovers, however they *act* like lovers. With Ann Louise's whiny-loser husband *Walt* (James Olson) a member of the gang, forced to accept sloppy seconds.When it comes to their bank robbery activities, screenwriter Sam Rolfe gives The Frank Clinger Gang both a clever and convincing modus operandi. They hold up in their home state of Oregon for a few months after a job. Then when it's time to go back in business, they travel to another state about a hundred miles away and hit three banks in a row.

Always in towns with less than ten thousand citizens, so The Clinger Gang, armed with their Tommy-Guns, always have more firepower than local authorities. And they only hit banks associated with a local factory, mill, or mine, so they hit the banks when they're flush with payroll cash.The robbery in Barrett's hometown turns into a well done violent shoot-out sequence, with Clinger spraying the bank with Tommy-Gun fire and David killing one of the gang in the getaway. When the gun smoke clears both Susan and David's dog Buck are shot dead. Out of vengeance for Susan and Buck and civic duty, David decides to hunt down the remaining gang members. He's paid a thousand dollar reward for the gang member he managed to kill. He uses it to purchase a spiffy new car ("*It'll beat anything on*

the road. It gets ten miles an hour."), that he customizes like a thirties era *Batmobile* with hidden compartments for his weapons inside.

While the gangsters use Tommy-Guns, David's weapon of choice is a wide variety of pump-action shotguns, but he also utilizes dynamite, and in an especially clever sequence, a bear trap. You see David Barrett is not only a decorated soldier, he's an experienced hunter. And it's both skills he utilizes to hunt down his fedora-wearing prey. When he explains to his father what his plan is, he describes it as such, "*Hunting is something you taught me pa'. Learn the habits of the animal. Read the signs, track, set traps, deal with it any way you have to, to bring it down.*" Hence the title of the series. And after he eventually does hunt them down (refreshingly, he ends up killing most of them), in true pilot fashion, he realizes he's pretty good at this sorta' thing, so he decides to do it full time.

The TV movie was what they called at the time a *backdoor pilot.* Which meant it was aired as a movie and if it did well in the ratings, it would be on the fall schedule the next season. A lot of popular shows started that way, "*Kung Fu*", "*The Rookies*", "*Alias Smith and Jones*", "*Starkey and Hutch*". But this pilot was one of the better action TV movies of the first half of the seventies. It was definitely one of the most violent.

The movie was produced in the wake of Arthur Penn's "*Bonnie & Clyde*", Roger Corman's "*Bloody Mama*" and John Milius' "*Dillinger*" and was meant to be comparable. And, except for spurting red blood squibs, it was. It even features major characters suffering slow-motion death scenes. Like those other films, "*Manhunter*" was a nasty piece of work, and refreshing for TV, a movie that had the integrity of its own brutality.

Would it be better if the Tommy-Guns Swiss-cheesed motherfuckers in big sprays of red blood? Or if David Barrett's pump-action shotgun shells landed with the impact of Charlie Rane's shotgun blasts in "*Rolling Thunder*"? Or if the gangsters could spew profanity? Of course, it would. But "*Manhunter*" was violent enough to cause controversy when it aired. And when you watch it you can understand why. The show has a vicious streak. While the dialogue in the screenplay by Sam Rolfe doesn't quite contain the pulp poetry of either Milius or Benton and Newman (also Robert Towne), it's still pretty damn good. And Rolfe is a damn good storyteller. Way back when Sam Rolfe created "*The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*" TV series (then titled "*Solo*") he sent the script to Ian Fleming to possibly collaborate. He also sent outlines for other possible "*Solo*" episodes. Fleming was so impressed he tried to purchase some of the stories for future *Bond* books.

The film is filled with a collection of elements that made it seem closer to a theatrical feature than a TV movie of the week. Immediately what you notice is the natural lighting of Jacques R. Marquette's cinematography. And that alone makes it look different from any other Quinn Martin production. He even has a few shots that were shot at the first rays of dawn and even one scene that takes place at magic hour. I'm a big fan of Marquette's work on Roger Corman's "*The Last Woman on Earth*" and Richard Compton's "*Return to Macon County*", and his photography on this absolutely outclasses Jules Brenner's work on "*Dillinger*" and John Alonzo's efforts on "*Bloody Mama*".

Also, George B. Chan, a Quinn Martin regular, period art direction is simple but both impressive and convincing. Especially the collection of small towns (that are obviously real) The Clinger Gang targets. Chan's art direction looks especially impressive when compared to the truly chintzy period production design in last year's Netflix's film with a similar story, "*The Highwaymen*".

Walter Grauman's work here isn't flashy, especially when compared to Milius and Penn, but his shooting is clever, resourceful, and dynamic. All qualities essential to pulling off a quality piece of work on a TV movie schedule. And you can tell that Martin and CBS gave him a longer shooting schedule than those two-week bum rush jobs that ABC forced on their TV movie helmers. But along with Marquette's photography the most distinguished contribution is an extremely dynamic action film score by TV veteran Duane Tatro.

As the picture's lead Ken Howard, who's as big as a linebacker in this, is good. He's not as good as Joe Don Baker or William Devane, or Michael Parks would have been. But he's effective and sincere. When I knew Burt Reynolds before he passed away, I asked him about his Quinn Martin TV show "*Dan August*". Since Burt's personality was one of his most identifying characteristics, I always wondered why he decided to play Dan August so stoic.

He told me, "Quentin, that was a Quinn Martin show. That's how Quinn wanted it. He didn't want any horsing around from his series leads. If you're a lead on a Quinn Martin show, you do it like Efrem Zimbalist fuckin' Jr. No more, no less."

And that's pretty much Ken Howard's situation here. Practically everybody else in the cast gets to do more acting than Howard. But while you root for Howard's David Barrett, when it comes to audience interest, it's hard for him to compete with The Frank Clinger Gang. They're fucking great! Or they would be great if we

spent more time with them. Which if this was a real feature film, as opposed to a pilot for a TV series, we would.

Gary Lockwood, who was so sexy in his black t-shirt in "*Model Shop*" and walking around in Lee J. Cobb's bathrobe in "*They Came To Rob Las Vegas*", had gained twenty pounds by the early seventies. Since the sixties, Lockwood almost always played pricks. Now he played puffy over the hill pricks. As Frank Clinger Lockwood is a beefy loathsome bully. On one hand, he's a trigger-happy sociopath who bullies his own gang unmercifully. On the other, he's a half-witted man-child who relies on his sister like a mother and a lover. Along with his episode of the seventies Kurt Russell western TV show "*The Quest*" (titled "*The Longest Drive*"), it's Lockwood's best work in the seventies. As his incestuous sister, the former *Girl from U.N.C.L.E. April Dancer,* Stefanie Powers is terrific as Ann Louise. In fact, considering how little they give her to do, she's almost too good. She never has one scene of her own (they never even give her a scene with her loser husband *Walt*, which is a damn shame). She's the most intriguing character in the whole story and we never learn anything about her. Also, she doesn't engage in the normal scenery-chewing that Dorothy Provine and Faye Dunaway have associated with the Bonnie Parker archetype. She has more poise than anybody else in the film. And she cuts an iconic figure in her thirties fashions, sitting behind the wheel of the gangster's car, idling in front of the bank (she's the getaway driver).

But it's James Olson, star of Robert Wise's "*The Andromeda Strain*" (an actor I've never liked), that steals the picture. His loser character Walt has all the best lines, and he's laugh-out-loud funny in the ferocious way her tears into them. And the entire section in the middle, with Olson, Howard, and a bear trap, I've never forgotten since I was twelve and saw the movie when it first aired on CBS. The supporting cast is not just the usual collection of TV familiar faces, but a (no doubt) expensive collection of feature film supporting actors.

Along with Lockwood, Powers, and Olson, the Frank Clinger Gang is comprised of Peckinpah regular L.Q. Jones, straight from "*Silent Running*", Ron Rifkin, and "*Rolling Thunder's*" *Automatic Slim* himself, Luke Askew. But in other parts are Peckinpah regular R.G Armstrong, Bobby ("*good guy"*) Hogan, a brothel madam played by (Marie The Killers Windsor) who greets customers when they walk through the door with the line, "*Welcome to fun town, John!*" as David's little sister Hilarie Thompson, who bullied Amy Irving in "*The Fury*" till she started bleeding from every hole, and as a nervous bank manager Lou Frizzell, the friendly druggist who sold Hermie the rubbers in "*Summer of '42"*.

When the TV movie aired, on February 26 1974, it did pretty well (I *watched it*). The highest-rated show of the night was Gloria Swanson making her television film debut, over on "*The ABC Movie Of The Week*", in the horror film "*Killer Bees"*, co-starring newlyweds Kate Jackson and Edward Albert. That film finished eleventh in the ratings for the whole week. But "*Manhunter*" didn't go head to head with it, starting at 9:30, during that film's last half hour. Instead "*Manhunte*r" went up against "*Marcus Welby M.D.*" over on ABC, and "*Police Story*" on NBC. Regardless CBS and Quinn Martin were happy enough with the results to make a full twenty-two episode commitment to next season's fall schedule.

The series followed the same template as the TV movie. Ken Howard as thirties bounty hunter David Barrett, chasing after thirties gangster characters that were surrogates for real-life thirties gangsters. The first episode of the series saw him going after a *Ma Barker*-like gang called *The Ma Gantry Gang*, with "*High Sierra*" and "*Food of the Gods*" star Ida Lupino playing *Ma' Gantry,* and Don Stoud and Sam Elliott as her two killer sons (Stroud basically recreating his role from Corman's Ma Barker flick, "*Bloody Mama*"). In another episode, babyface Michael Burns plays a *Baby Face Nelson* type. In another, Bo Hopkins and seventies sleaze bag William Watson would recreate *the Kansas City Massacre* (a whole year before Bo Hopkins would play *Pretty Boy Floyd* in Dan Curtis' TV movie about the same subject). And in a show similar to the "*Cade's County*" episode "*A Gun for Billy*" starring Bobby Darin, *Leggs Diamond*-himself, Ray Danton would star in a chapter titled, "*The Man Who Thought He Was Dillinger*".

The show went on the air at the start of the 74/75 fall season on September 11, 1974, on Wednesday nights at ten o'clock. It aired right after "*Cannon"* starring William Conrad. It aired opposite two other new series on the other two networks, "*Get Christie Love"* starring Teresa Graves on ABC, and "*Petrocelli*" starring Barry Newman over on NBC. "*Manhunter*" was a damn good series, one of Quinn Martin's best, but it only lasted one season. CBS gave it the ax for three reasons. One, opposite two other new series, it never beat "*Petrocelli*" over on NBC. Two, it never sufficiently held on to its lead-in show "*Cannon's*" sizable audience. But three, and the main reason it didn't at least go into re-runs over the summer, was the show was highly criticized for its level of violence.

When I was a kid I watched the TV movie, but I didn't really watch the series. Because instead, I was a big *"Get Christie Love*" fan (I also had a crush on Teresa Graves). And if I wasn't watching *Ms. Love*, I was watching Barry Newman's *Petrocelli* build that house of his one brick at a time.But I did manage to catch one episode of the Ken Howard show. The one I saw featured Glenn Corbet who had

starred in a really cool regional redneck movie I saw when I was in Tennessee the year-earlier called *"Ride In A Pink Car"*.

In the show, Corbett played a pilot who (somehow) got himself a World War I combat airplane (the kind with the machine gun mounted on the front). And was killing people by flying over and shooting them dead. I thought it was a pretty cool idea (I *still do*), and a pretty good show. So I went back to school the next day and ask my 6th-grade teacher, Mr. Cody, did he watch anything last night? He said,"*Yes, I watched Manhunter*."I said,"*So did I. Wasn't it cool?*"That's when he told me,"*I found the violence repulsive.*"Well, no accounting for taste. But Mr. Cody wasn't the only one. It was easily the most violent show on CBS, even beating out two-fisted Mike Connors on "*Mannix*". To get anywhere near as violent as bad guys with Tommy-Guns and good guys with pump-action sawed-off shotguns, you had to turn over to ABC and watch "*S.W.A.T.*"

No Way Out (1975)

A pasta-land violent crime picture where visiting French superstar Alain Delon *blasts* his way through an assortment of famous Euro film faces.

Tony Arzenta (Alain Delon) – the best Hit Man in the business – works for a crime family syndicate, run by four crime bosses, all from different countries, – legendary Hollywood *old fuck* – Richard ("The Violent Professionals") Conte (Italy), eagle-faced – normally a Nazi – Anton Diffring (Germany, and also in Delon's *"Borsalino and Co",* and strangely unbilled here), Ettore ("Ringo and his Golden Pistol") Manni (United Kingdom, and it's implied he's gay), and ugly American Lino ("Gambling City") Troisi (USA, and in a group that includes Richard Conte and Anton Diffring, *he's* the asshole!), and their lawyer oily-haired Umberto("The Family") Orsini. When Delon's Arzenta informs the four crime bosses he wants to retire, they retaliate by accidentally blowing his wife Nicoletta ("Navajo Joe") Machiavelli and their effeminate young son to smithereens (*You don't quit us, we retire you, permanently!).*

So naturally the greatest *Hit Man* in the business, makes it his *business* to rub out all four capo's in big *Omen*-style murder set pieces, Manni on a train (my favorite), Diffring and his body guards on the streets of Copenhagen, Troisi at his home (with his wife Rosalba Neri, who maybe has thirty seconds of screen time), and finally at the end with Conte and Orsini in a cynical surprise freeze frame finish (*Surprise? I saw it coming a mile away*).

As effective as Delon is in his made-to-order top of the heap hit man role, it's the guest-star mob bosses waiting their turn to be bumped off in grand Roman style, that fuels the fun of the film. They bring to mind the special guest-star victims of "*The Abominable Dr. Phibes"* – in fact you keep waiting for Terry Thomas to show up and get his brains splattered against the wall by Delon's Arzenta.

Despite being a particularly vicious entry in an already violently vicious genre, *"No Way Out"* is a pretty classy affair. The film hums at a hurtling pace (as soon as it gets going i.e. wifey and brat go *boom!*), and Tessari has a real commitment to staging the action scenes as brutal and operatic as possible, keeping viewers interest throughout (like for instance the huge fish tank in one of the bosses house. You know it's going to play into the eventual murder set piece, but when it finally does it's even more spectacular than you were expecting).

And you just can't underestimate the effect that visiting (*slumming?)* French superstar Alain Delon has on this whole enterprise. There's a superstar royalty excitement to Alain Delon's presence in this film that the violent Henry Silva Italian trash movies don't possess. The dark haired Delon has appeared in some pretty classy crime movies and the after effects of Henri Verneuil, Jean Herman, and René Clément are immediately felt as soon as Delon's Tony Arzenta enters frame, but especially Jean-Pierre Melville, and particularly the two men's most stylish collaboration, *"Le Samurai"*.

Now admittedly, any movie that cast Alain Delon as – the best *Hit Man* in the business – is going to bring to mind *Jef* in the Melville film. But Tessari leans into the connection, not away from it. As much as the three Sergio's (Leone, Corbucci, and Sollima), it was Tessari with his two *Ringo movies* (*"A Pistol For Ringo"* and *"The Return of Ringo"*) that popularized the Italian western genre in the beginning. But after a few years, with a couple of exceptions (his genuinely mysterious giallo *"My Dear Killer"*), he drifted into the loud, highly acrobatic, comic style action film that was popular in Italy in the seventies, and most of these entries are of no interest whatsoever.

But getting the gig directing Alain Delon, in his first (and only) Italian crime picture, brings the best out of the filmmaker (no lazy zooms, no forever fiddling with the focus before the camera assistant finally finds it, no sloppy post-sync flubs, and unlike a lot of pasta-land pictures, a real attempt at sound editing). And that's partly due to Delon's presence, Tessari's larger than normal budget, and longer than normal shooting schedule, and his effective mimicry of J.P. Melville.

"*No Way Out"* doesn't play like an Italian crime picture done in the style of J.P. Melville. It plays *as if* Jean-Pierre Melville came to Italy in '74 and made a violent *Hit Man movie* with his boy Delon. In fact if you want to view the whole film as a de facto sequel to *"Le Samurai"*, go ahead.

A richly deserved (B+).

The ‘Human’ Factor (1975)

George (“Airport 75”) Kennedy plays *John Kinsdale,* an American computer engineer who lives abroad in Rome with his family (his wife and seven-year-old daughter), who becomes unglued when his loved ones are massacred one afternoon by a bunch of seventies Euro-styled, Baader-Meinhof inspired terrorists.

Soon it becomes apparent that these massacres of American families living abroad in Italy are part of a calculated rein of terror. The local Italian cop on the case, Raf (“*The Other Side of Midnight”*) Vallone, is sympathetic, but useless. So Kennedy’s Kinsdale turns to his fellow expatriate work buddy, British John (“Ryan’s Daughter”) Mills, and the two of them feed the information about the attacks into the brain of the super computer they work with (they work for a company, that through their computer, simulates war games for the American military). And lo and behold the computer discovers a pattern that the authorities are unaware of, and gives Kennedy an estimate on the next American family to be targeted by the terrorists. But rather than bring the ineffectual Italian police into the loop, George Kennedy, loaded for bear, goes by himself to do battle with the slaughterers of his family.

I didn’t see “*Death Wish”* when it was first released in ‘74 (when you’re dependent on your parents taking you to R–rated titles, some flicks get past you). It wasn’t till around ‘76, when “*Death Wish”* aired on *The CBS Friday Night Movie* that I finally saw it (the rape scene was scissored, but the rest held up rather nicely). So that makes Edward Dmytryk’s 1975’s “*The ‘Human’ Factor”* the first official ‘Revengeamatic’ I ever saw. I watched it with my mom and a few of her friends at a discount cinema in Hermosa Beach called *The Marina 3,* and a lusting for blood good time was had by all.

Before this movie I had seen films that had revenge as a motivation for their plot (“*For A Few Dollars More”, “Hang ‘em High”, “The Abominable Dr.Phibes”),* but they weren’t blood-thirsty revenge thrillers, where the propulsive engine for the entire film was sending its hero after the dirty inhuman killers who slaughtered their family and their vengeance-fueled hero wiping them out in a bombastic explosion of carnage at the pictures climax.

Burt Reynolds *Gator McKlusky* went after the sheriff *J.C. Connors* (Ned Beatty) for murdering his hippy kid brother *Donny* in “*White Lightning”.* But Reynolds

doesn't just go after the villains like a junkyard dog. He was calculating about his vengeance, he makes a deal with the Feds to try and get evidence of Connors' bootlegging actives.

After the crooked casino, '*The Lucky Spot',* slices him to ribbons and dumps him for dead on the side of the road, Joe Don Baker's *Buford Pusser* gets his big stick and goes back to *The Lucky Spot* and busts a ton of skulls, shoulders, wrists, and arms. And that was absolutely a stand up and cheer audience moment.

But after that, "*Walking Tall"* still had an hour of movie left to go.

What was different about "*The 'Human' Factor"* was the roaring rampage of revenge was the whole enchilada. There wasn't any question in the movie or its makers mind whose side the audience should be on.

And offering up this purifying slaughter of the wicked as the picture's climax – a climax the whole movie has been dramatically building towards – was tremendously exciting.

My memory of the entire action set piece – which takes place in a supermarket where the terrorists are holding about thirty people hostage – is still vivid to this day.

Because I had never witnessed the bloodlust of the lead character pass over into the audience like it did in the final act of "*The 'Human' Factor"*.

It was one of the most thrilling and vivid connections I had ever felt between myself, the lead character on screen, and the strangers in the audience that surrounded me. We were all plugged into Kennedy's retribution, and we all cheered in bloody unison as he blasted the bastards (especially the pretty-faced female terrorist, who acted as a decoy to all the slaughtered families).

That's what I felt then, but how about now?

Actually, Edward ("*Bluebeard")* Dmytryk's "*The 'Human' Factor"* is one of those films that looks a hell of a lot more impressive today then it probably did when it came out. It's really a well- made action film (it was Dmytryk's last picture, and it's one of the best last films of a decades spanning Hollywood journeyman).

At one point when Kennedy tracks down one of the terrorists and kills him, the scene becomes a little ridiculous (he ends up killing him with a chain like a Shaw Brothers movie). But even that sequence doesn't derail the picture, it actually brings in a bit of levity that's much appreciated. But after the terrorists chain death,

Kennedy goes and investigates the house he found him at, and we get sucked right back into the seriousness of his vengeance quest, when we realize he's found the terrorists hiding place. We recognize the rooms from a few glimpses we've been given in earlier scenes, and we're impressed Big George has done such a good job tracking them down.

I also remember at that *Marina 3* screening with my mom, *The 'Human' Factor* playing on a double feature with a George Segal movie called "*Russian Roulette",* which was one of the most boring so-called action movies I had ever seen. But no worries, when it came to satisfying the audience, "*The 'Human' Factor"* did the work of two movies. Especially that squib blasting shoot 'em up in the supermarket (when a housewife grabs a sub-machine gun and lends Kennedy a hand by blowing the shit out of one of the ski mask wearing terrorists, the audience lost their fucking minds!). And when the film ended on a Freeze-Frame of big George after he emptied his automatic into the terrorist cell leaders dead body, a collective '*right on'* could be heard throughout *The Marina 3* auditorium.

By virtue of it being my first Revengeamatic, a higher than deserved (B).

Trackdown (1976)

If after I describe the plot of Richard Heffron's *"Trackdown"* it sounds familiar, that's because it's a cross-between both of Paul Schrader's screenplays*, "Taxi Driver" and "Hardcore"*.

Pretty teenage runaway *Betsy Calhoun,* played by pretty Karen ("Almost Summer") Lamm (before she became Mrs. Dennis Wilson), gets targeted within minutes of stepping off the bus from Wyoming onto Hollywood Blvd. Pimps that staked out the Hollywood bus terminal and went shopping for young naive underage white girls as easily as they'd shop for cantaloupes in the fruit section of the supermarket was a cliche in most movies of this ilk (see also "Little Ladies of the Night" and "Kinjite").

Once in Hollywood her bag with all her possessions and money is stolen, leaving her desperate and helpless, all the better for Hollywood con man *Chucho* (played by Erik Estrada, before *Ponch* on "CHiP's, but after *Julio* in "Airport 1975") to swoop in and save the day (Estrada arranged for her bag to be stolen). And soon he buys her some food, wins her confidence, and they go to his apartment where he seduces her. But a carload of Latino lowrider stereotypes show up and snatch Betsy from Chucho (who reluctantly hands her over to the *vicious vatos)*.

The gang-bangers gang-bang Betsy, then string her out on heroin, then sell her to frizzy frantic Ray Sharkey (two years before "Who'll Stop the Rain") who hops up and down and lets his feather-like mustache give his performance for him. Sharkey then sells Betsy to a high-priced prostitution racket owned by snarling one-note Vince Cannon (sort of a bantam weight James Lusi), and run by his classy madam *Jessica* (played by a slumming Anne Archer), who cleans Betsy up, buys her some nice dresses, and takes her under her wing in the high-priced call girl game (Archer is sort of like *Norma*, the madam that Nancy Allen's *Liz Blake* is always on the phone with in *"Dressed To Kill",* only three years down the line).

Meanwhile, a big ass pickup truck pulls into town driven by Wyoming horse rancher *Big Jim Calhoun,* played by Robert Mitchum's son, Big Jim Mitchum (in easily his best leading man performance). Betsy is his sister, he knows she's runaway to Los Angeles, and he's come to find her and take her back home. At first he's given the runaround by the police and the halfway houses, till he befriends a sympathetic social worker played by "The Dark's" Cathy Lee Crosby (sporting a stunning Farrah Fawcett flip), and *unconvincingly* a guilty Erik Estrada who wants to make amends.

For an initial viewing the film's an enjoyable revengeamatic.

It has a strong cast, and as per usual Richard Heffron does a good job telling the story (he was one of the main directors on George Peppard's TV series *"Banacek",* where storytelling was everything), and personable Karen Lamm's *road to ruin* sticks in your guts. Compared to all these movies ("Taxi Driver", "Hardcore", "Little Ladies of the Night", "Angel") it's Lamm's *Betsy* that I'm the most invested in being saved (the film's cruelest touch is killing Lamm before Mitchum finds her).

But on a second viewing it just doesn't have enough standout scenes to go with the movie's – admittedly entertaining – attitude.

Once Betsy bites the dust, it's hard to justify getting to the closing credits. Other than poor Karen Lamm's journey, and Jim Mitchum's genuine likability, the only thing anybody remembers about *"Trackdown"* is its one really clever action scene.

High class whoremonger Vince Cannon runs his nooky enterprise in the penthouse of a tall building (not quite a skyscraper, but close). Mitchum and his side-kick Estrada (*I never forgive Estrada for the part he played in Lamm's tragedy the way Mitchum seems to*) try to gain access to Cannon's lair by coming up the elevator shaft. With Estrada bringing their elevator car up and down and Mitchum blasting away with his 45 Automatic on the roof at Cannon's bodyguards in their supersonic private express elevator. It's a real nifty scene that's very impressively staged with Mitchum never looking better.

During the elevator shaft scene, the film finally gets to where you've hoped its been going all along. Unfortunately that's as good as the films ever going to get, and it's never going to get that good again. The film needed at least three scenes like that.

But minus that, the effort just comes across like violent television.

Columbia Pictures opened *"Taxi Driver"* in February of '76. Three months into its run, in April of '76, United Artists (rather cheekily) opened *"Trackdown"*. Now it wasn't unusual for a rival studio to pick up a cheapie exploitation picture as an independent pick up that resembles a classier film by one of their competitors. But usually they'd wait till after the original film had finished its theatrical engagement. In April *"Taxi Driver"* was still playing in cinemas, in fact it was just starting to widen its opening to neighborhood cinemas.

So that was a clear case of United Artist kicking Columbia in the shins with not just a cheapie knock-off, but the type of film that Paul Schrader's screenplay was meant to subvert.

"Trackdown" is *"Taxi Driver"* without irony.

Without question.

"Trackdown" is an unexamined *"Taxi Driver". (C+)*

The MUTHERS (1976)

Now while it's true I have a soft spot in my heart for Filipino cinema in general, and director Cirio Santiago in particular. My affection for his 1976 women in prison (sorta) flick *The MUTHERS* has grown over the years, until this cruddy little grindhouse cheapie has actually become one of my favorite movies.

Jeannie Bell (from Santiago's *T.N.T. Jackson*) & Rosanne Katon (Ebony from Santiago's Ebony, Ivory & Jade) play modern day pirates in the South China Sea. Bell is the Cap't, Katon is the 2nd Lt. and a whole boat full of male Filipinos are the pirate crew. They sort of operate like Modesty Blaise and Willie Garvin used to operate back when they were smugglers, with Bell as Modesty and Katon as Willie. Bell learns her little sister got thrown into a Banana Republic women's prison (Santiago's female action heroes always get into trouble looking for their damn little sisters, Bell's "T.N.T. Jackson", Jillian Kessler's "Firecracker" and Cat Sassoon's "Angel Fist"). And then Bell and Katon get themselves thrown into the same prison in an effort to find and rescue her.

So why is this cruddy little flick one of my favorite movies? It's the playful execution of a preposterous story that's the key to the film's charm. A friend once made the observation that if you were to watch three children play act a scene from "Starsky & Hutch" that they'd seen on TV the night before, say Starsky and Hutch interrogating a prisoner, the children's level of intensity and commitment to what they were doing would be both more charming and sincere then the same scene played by Paul Michael Glaser and David Soul.

Well both Bell's and Katon's performance achieve this kids-at-play quality. They could very well be two little girls playing pirate in their backyard. Add that to the Modesty Blaise meets Pippi Longstocking conception of their characters, and the genuine camaraderie the two women share, maybe only *The Little Rascals* could of packed more charm into its 88 minutes. Considering how many movies Santiago made, it's a damn shame he didn't make one more Bell & Katon pirate adventure.

Katon who was a charmer in all of her drive-in movies (including Jack Hill's *The Swinging Cheerleaders*), as well being my favorite Afro Sheen Commercial Girl ("Ya' stopped me, didn't ya"?) is even better here as the more wisecracking, constantly bemused member of the team. And unlike Bell, does most of her own fighting in the martial art scenes.

Now while she might not be Angela Mao, in the world of sloppy Filipinos Kung Fu fights, she ain't bad. And her line about co-star Jayne Kennedy's Serena, "I've kissed a lot of ass in my day, but I'll be dammed before I kiss that bitches ass", is a guaranteed grindhouse audience chortler. Jeannie Bell (the assumed name that D.I.V.A.S. member "Copperhead " was living under when "Black Mamba" found her) isn't quite as in on the joke as her co-star Katon, but her straight self-seriousness pays off in the films second half.

Bell, who wasn't much of a fighter (in both this and *T.N.T Jackson* the petite femme is doubled by a rather tall and obviously male fighter in a ratty afro wig), was, alongside Pam Grier and Brenda Sykes, the most beautiful of the ebony goddesses that graced the genre (the perfect Jeannie Bell double feature would be *The MUTHERS* paired alongside, not *T.N.T Jackson*, but Lee Frost's slightly wonderful *Policewomen*) .

But *The MUTHERS* has two other black female leads. Trina Parks, who was the star of the late great William Witney's last feature *Darktown Strutters*, as well as the black half of the Bambi & Thumper duo in *Diamonds Are Forever,* plays another prisoner who fills Bell & Katon in on the lay of the land at the prison, and joins them in their escape attempt. Parks proves to be quite a naturalistic actress, and has no problem with the films playfully serious tone. She also has a great bring the house down laugh line that I won't spoil here.

But it's the too beautiful for words Jayne Kennedy, as the cruel wardens kept concubine, that's the real surprise, with a performance that's neither playful nor self-serious but utterly sincere. Miss Kennedy obviously wanted to prove to the world she could act, and in *The MUTHERS* tackles her first lead role with everything she's got. It's the best acting performance by an American actor in a Santiago production.

The stunning Kennedy might of very well been the real deal, it's a damn shame she never got more opportunities to find out. She's also impressive in my other favorite Santiago film, *Death Force* (theatrical title) *Fighting Mad* (Continental Home Video title) alongside her husband Leon Issac Kennedy and Santiago regular James Iglehart (*Bamboo Gods and Iron Men*). As well as being easily the best thing in her husband's *Body and Soul* remake of the eighties (admittedly, while not a patch on the original classic, that film is kind of entertaining).

Michael Weldon wrote in his "Psychotronic" review of *The MUTHERS*, "How often do you get to see a film with four beautiful black women in the leads?" Let

me close this review with a line director Joe Dante once said about one of his similar favorite movies, Albert Zugsmith's *Confessions Of An Opium Eater*; "Is it a good film? Well…who know…and what does that mean anyway? But is it a *great film*? Absolutely, positively unequivocally, *yes*!".

The Shootist (1976)

When it comes to who was chosen to helm John Wayne's final western/film, Don Siegel is a bit of an odd choice. While Siegel was one of the best genre filmmakers who ever lived, and during his career he made his share of westerns, he didn't make nearly as many his closest contemporaries Aldrich, Karlson, Fuller, Witney, Jack Arnold, and Gordon Douglas, nor did he make them as good.

In fact if it wasn't for the inclusion of his Elvis Presley western "Flaming Star" (a truly great fifties western, and maybe the most brutally violent American western of its era), his western filmography wouldn't be impressive at all. His first western, the Audie Murphy quickie, "The Duel at Silver Creek", is a very well conceived and executed picture, as well as being obviously a Siegel picture.

One of Siegel's most interesting storytelling tactics is audience misdirection. It's in his first film "The Verdict", "Flaming Star", "Charley Varrick", even in his Burt Reynolds caper comedy "Rough Cut". And it's used to dramatic effect in "The Duel of Silver Creek". Within the films first twelve minutes Faith Domergue is introduced as the least interesting character in a fifties western, the pretty lady love interest of the sheriff (complete with silk dress, fancy hat, and parasol). Only to shockingly revel that Miss Domergue is in cahoots with films villainous claim jumpers by strangling a wounded man to death. This sudden dramatic revelation snaps your attention into focus for the rest of the picture. It also colors your perception of, not only Miss Domergue, but practically every character she comes in contact with, especially the stuck on her sheriff (Stephen McNally), who from that moment on looks like a complete fool.

And while the film has it's silly moments – usually involving a ridiculous character named Johnny Sombrero (Eugene Iglesias) – aside from señor Sombrero, the films villains aren't a joke. One of my favorite heavies of the era, the Bogart like Gerald Mohr (check him out as the villain in the William Witney and John English serial "Jungle Girl". His Cheshire Cat smile hides a shark bite), leads an evil bunch of claim jumpers, dirty dogs who force gold prospectors to sign over their claims at the barrel of a gun, then savagely murders them. There's even a faint hint of the Ku Klux Klan about the jumpers, since some of them are respected members of the community, they operate a bit like a secret society. It's definitely a fun Audie Murphy western of that Universal period, but it's not the class act. Those bragging rights belong to Jack Arnold and his Murphy mystery western "No Name on the Bullet" (Siegel did two films with Audie Murphy and considered casting him as Scorpio in "Dirty Harry").

His last western before “The Shootist” was the least of his Eastwood collaborations, the wannabe spaghetti western “Two Mules for Sister Sara” which paired Clint with a very funny Shirley MacLaine (easily the best thing in the film, aside from a really memorable Ennio Morricone score). While the photography by legendary Mexican cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa ended Siegel’s shitty looking TV quality slump that had effected his work for his last six movies, the flick is still a half-hearted half-assed attempt to do a Corbucci like western, mixed in with a bit of “The African Queen” style battle of the sexes.

When it’s just Eastwood & MacLaine out in the desert by themselves, the film is lightly amusing. But its lack of commitment, mediocre premise, script, action, and outcome, not to mention Eastwood’s silly looking leather hat ultimately do it in. Fact of the matter, after “Flaming Star”, Siegel’s best western is his TV movie “Stranger On The Run”. Which even though it has the Universal TV look of a “The Virginian” episode, it has, after Andy Robinson’s performance as Scorpio in “Dirty Harry”, the best performance in a Siegel film. Michael Parks as corrupt, walrus mustached sheriff Vince McKay.

Which brings us to “The Shootist”. There’s nothing in “The Shootist” you haven’t seen done many times before and done better. Including a few years earlier by Richard Fleischer in “The Spikes Gang” (which also shares young actor Ron Howard), and a few years later by Lamont Johnson in “Cattle Annie & Little Britches”. But what you haven’t seen before is a dying John Wayne give his last performance. And it's Wayne’s performance, and the performances of some of the surrounding characters (Howard, Richard Boone, Harry Morgan, and Sheree North) that make “The Shootist”, not the classic it wants to be, but memorable nonetheless.

The film really only has one purpose, to be a cinematic eulogy to Wayne’s career (“On Golden Pond” served the same function for Henry Fonda). Not only is that a dubious reason to make a film, the maudliness inherently involved in such an endeavor, seems a dishonorable pursuit for any serious artist (though there are some successful examples, Peter Bogdanovich’s swan song to Boris Karloff “Targets” being one of them). But as suspicious as I am when a director tries to tug on my heartstrings, even I think John Wayne ending his career with “Rooster Cogburn & The Lady” would be a damn shame. The fact that “The Shootist” is a good film at all, is all due to Wayne, which in its own way, is perfectly fitting for the big man.

Like many a star at the twilight of their career, who have actually managed to remain stars, the last ten years of their career usually falls into a pattern: Geriatric versions of the movies that they use to make, usually featuring a few young performers, and many familiar faces from the old days. Usually directed by one or two directors that the aging star is comfortable with. This describes the last ten years of Bob Hope's movie career, Jerry Lewis' twilight starring career, Glenn Ford's last decade staring in westerns, and Charles Bronson's last ten years at Cannon Pictures. And this describes Wayne's last decade to a tee. Aside from crazy experiments like "McQ" (no good, but I kinda like it anyway, if for nothing else that amazing gun that McQ shoots), and "Brannigan" (silly, but that's what's enjoyable about it), during the last decade of John Wayne's career he made *John Wayne movies*.

Well, didn't he always, I hear you ask. Well yeah, but not like in the seventies. "Chisum", "Big Jake", "Rio Lobo", " Cahill: U.S. Marshal" and "The Train Robbers" didn't need titles, even as generic as those titles were. They could of just been issued numbers, Andrew McLaglen Wayne western number 4, Burt Kennedy Wayne western number 3, Howard Hawks "Rio Bravo" redo number 3.

Now while I'm being a smart ass, these pictures are all pretty watchable. Compared to the last ten years of Bob Hope's movie career, they're one classic after another. "Cahill" is pretty solid, "The Train Robbers" is so light it's barley a movie, but that doesn't mean it's not amusing, and "Big Jake " is downright good. But they are what they are, a last decade John Wayne western. Whether his name is Cahill, Jake McCandles, John Chisum, or John T. Chance the third, Wayne is the same, his costumes are the same, and the people acting in the scenes with Wayne are the same. With two exceptions, Mark Rydell's "The Cowboys" and Siegel's "The Shootist".

And just the sheer fact that with these two films Wayne breaks the mold, makes them kind of exciting. They're not *John Wayne movies* but real movies (shades of Siegel's work with Elvis). He's not Cahill, or Chisum or McLintock, which is to say he's not just the persona that the actor has grown into, he's a character. Watching "The Cowboys" again, I was surprised how old he played the character (though apparently nobody could talk him out of that rug he wore). Even his wife didn't look like a Maureen O' Hara or a Yvonne De Carlo type, but a worn out old lady. And when he's killed, by Bruce Dern playing a character named Long Hair (Hippy), with the film having twenty minutes to go, you're flabbergasted.

Now of the two “The Cowboys” is the better movie, and is better directed (when we showed it recently at The New Beverly a very old Mark Rydell with his kids and grandkids showed up to watch it). But “The Shootist” is by far the better performance. It’s a little funny, while Wayne preferred working with the same group of guys, McLaglen, Kennedy, Hathaway, Hawks, George Sherman, when he worked outside of the regular corral, he seemed to respect the directors more. He gave a different kind of performance, he didn’t try and direct the picture (like apparently he did with Andy & Burt), he didn’t just act with the usual suspects (Ben Johnson, Forrest Tucker, Maureen O’Hara, his son, Robert Mitchum’s son), and he really seemed to care.

So basically Don Siegel’s job was to not be Burt Kennedy. Well he wasn’t and he cast the film well, but he wasn’t Don Siegel either. There’s a sense of vision to “The Cowboys”. The movie isn’t really all that, but Rydell thinks it is, and by the time the children bust open that box of weapons to kill that basterd Dern, you agree. Other then your last time watching John Wayne, “The Shootist” is so devoid of vision the credits could have been printed in Braille. Siegel doesn’t even do what Siegel does best action (aka *violence*).

Almost all of Wayne’s movies of this time introduce the big man to the picture by having him take out some big mouth minor heavy, with a witty sarcastic line, a faster then you draw, or one of Wayne’s wild haymaker punches. And all of them are better then the one that starts “The Shootist” (“Big Jake” is the best of them, “Not you, you scare me”). And the final climatic shoot out with Richard Boone, Hugh O’Brian, and Bill MCKinney is *awful* (the worst staged action of Siegel’s career), and it doesn’t make a lick of sense. About the only Siegel-like talent that Don demonstrates other then the casting and directing of actors (not to imply that’s nothing), is his talent at directing comedy scenes inside of his action movies (“Coogan’s Bluff” & “Dirty Harry”).

Wayne naturally gets every laugh he wants. Harry Morgan is a hoot and a half (he gets the movies biggest laughs), and Siegel regular Sheree North shares one of Wayne’s best scenes of the last decade of his career as a former flame with an agenda. And maybe the only genuine Siegel touch in the whole film is the entrance of hillbilly mad dog killer Richard Boone, riding a fancy horseless carriage (a car). A dandifying touch that’s pure Siegel (by this time in Wayne’s career, Richard Boone was the only actor left on earth who could threaten The Duke, and he and the audience could take it seriously).

Unfortunately, any time anyone gets any comic juices flowing, Lauren Bacall shows up and throws a wet blanket on the scene (Bacall wears a hair bun like it's a chastity belt). Still Siegel guided Wayne through not only his last western, but if not his best performance, maybe his most dignified. And The Duke ending his long reign with dignity (least we forget “Rooster Cogburn & the Lady”), what more can you ask?

Is “The Shootist” good? Well, let’s just say, it’s good enough.

Death Promise (1977)

Reviewed by Quentin Tarantino and Jim Sheldon

Two late seventies films that never received a proper LA release crept into Los Angeles in 1980 as part of the Howard Mahler catalog, a South Bronx-set Kung Fu revengeamatic, and a third-rate Pam Grier rip-off, titled respectively, *Death Promise* and *Velvet Smooth.*

Velvet Smooth could be called *Burlap Brown*, that by comparison at least, makes Jack Hill look like Joseph Von Sternberg. The film features as its lead Johnnie Hill, a pretty worn out looking bag of bones, who is a practitioner of the lousiest Karate chops this side of *Emma Peel.* Star-power is left up to a cameo by the NY Jets' Emerson Boozer, who gives Vida Blue in *Black Gunn* a run for his money when it comes to least auspicious screen debut.

The better film, *Death Promise,* is actually 1977's *The Slumlords,* heavily promoted inside the pages of Marvel comics magazine *The Deadly Hands of Kung Fu.* Manhattan made *Death Promise* has the distinction of being a rare multiracial revengeamatic, Puerto Rican dude and Asian dude team up to fight greedy slumlords (including one token black slumlord). The entire project appears to be a starring vehicle for the films lead, Charles Bonet. Bonet isn't particularly handsome, but he does have a distinct look, and while his acting experience is obviously limited, he's good enough to lead *this* movie (he also goes through a large portion of the film wearing one of those one-piece Italian leisure suits made famous on *Freaks and Geeks*).

Bonet teams up with Asian Kung Fu sparring partner Bill (Sonny Chiba's *The Bodyguard*) Louie to avenge the death of Bonet's pop after he and they take on the vicious slumlords (the film's original title) that are trying to evict them and the other tenants.

Normally this type of story falls on deaf ears with me.

The place is a fucking dump. Move out!

But the emphasis of the slumlord aspect, does offer the villains a deliciously detestable veneer. Especially, when in an effort to chase out the tenants, they drop off a box of rats in the hallway (talk about bastards, from that point on Bonet and Louie were justified for everything they did to those bastards). Naturally, the evil

greedy slumlords, are trying to chase out the tenants in order to close on a big construction deal.

Like Alain Delon does to the mafia dons in *No Way Out*, and *Dr. Phibes* does to the doctors in his vendetta, Bonet and Louie individually take out the no name special guest stars playing the gargoyle slumlords. One lawyer is punched to death by a karate fist thrust through a car window, there's a poison death ala-*You Only Live Twice*, and one unfortunate brother gets a bag of hungry rats tied to his face (ala-bag of snakes in *Johnny Firecloud*). And the main slumlord is variously pierced and sliced. And *(surprise!)* the main hit man working for the big bad slumlord is none other than the local martial arts instructor/mentor, who gets cut up and tossed off the building to his death.

Director Robert Warmflash keeps the fight blocking convincing in this '77 martial arts entry (Bonet could have joined the team in *Force Five,* he's at least preferable to that *Kill or Be Killed* South African goon James Ryan). Norbert Albertson Jr.'s screenplay (which includes opening narration) barely qualifies as a story.

But the Manhattan location photography of this era of New York in the seventies can't be beat. A New York exploitation movie shot by New Yorkers for other New Yorkers has the feeling of a legitimate piece of regional cinema. Really only same era all male porn has this kind of New York authenticity. A lousy rock group named *Opus,* under the direction of composers Mike Felder and Bill Daniels, sing the lousy opening credit song. Nevertheless, the whole tenement slumlord angle sticks in the mind and offers the flick a unique backdrop. (*C*).

Soul Brothers of Kung Fu (1977)

For lovers of the genre, one of the all-time favorites. Along with Yuen Woo-Ping's "Snake in the Eagle's Shadow," Cheung Sum's "Snake in the Monkey's Shadow" and "Soul Brothers" director Hwa Yi Hung's Billy Chong vehicle "Jade Claw", this is one of the best HK releases of the late seventies/early eighties to get theatrical exposure in this country. As well as stars Bruce Li's finest hour and a half. It's a classic tale of friendship, betrayal, and revenge that always manages to be more engaging and involving than it has any right to be. The story starts with our three heroes, two guys and a girl, adrift out to sea on a raft, refugees from some unnamed freedomless country.

The guys are Wong Li Yung (Bruce Li, here billed in the opening titles under his real name Ho Chung Tao) and "Deadly Venoms" Team Member ("The Toad") Lo Meng (here billed as Kuan Lun) as So San. Their mutual gal pal Chi Yung is played by Cuyang Pei Shan. While Lo Meng's San has given up hope and intends to toss himself into the sea, a blistered-lip Wong (Bruce Li) convinces San to hang on a little longer. Good thing too. No sooner do we witness this scene, then we cut to all three smiling, eating rice and drinking tea, rescued by a boat heading to Hong Kong. And by the time Bill Conti's theme from "Rocky" finishes over the opening credits, all three are living the illegal immigrant life in the big city.

The boys hustle day worker jobs as best they can, Wong driving a forklift, San welding, and every chance they get…. fighting bullies. One of the victims they save from a beating is black American teenager Tony (Carl Scott), the "Soul Brothers" (sic) of the title, who becomes Wong's student, friend, and all-around towel boy.

A charmingly played Hawksian rivalry over the affections of Chi develops between Wong and San but is cut short when Chi makes it clear she prefers Li's Wong. San, while disappointed, is still their friend, and bows out graciously (Watch for a sweet scene between Wong and San and a ring they bought for Chi). However, this is just the start of the more morally relaxed San's troubles. Soon after, the nightlife loving San has run afoul of the local casino owning gangster Chin See Po, favorite genre heavy Ku ("The Avenging Eagle") Feng.

Chin sends goon after goon to ambush Wong and San, all to no avail. In fact Wong gets so good at beating up Chin's men, he gets the bright idea that if he turned pro he could make some real money. Well no sooner than you can cut to stock footage of Madison Square Garden, Wong has become a professional boxer. Not only does

he win all of his fights, he (apparently) becomes both rich and world famous in the process. But just when it seems Wong and Chi have achieved the HK dream, Chin's men show up committing a surprising mid film tragedy. Wong vows vengeance against Chin, and so begins one of the best modern day training / recovery montages in the genre. It seems Wong has a trick up his sleeve. Not only can he fight like Bruce Lee, he has a secret fighting technique, called "The Steel Finger", which allows possessors to stick their fingers through opponents as if they were butter (his electrical Kung Fu dummy, with two red testicles that pop out when goosed, is an audience pleasing hoot).

Meanwhile poor San has gone from bad to worse. Gambling losses put him more and more in the crafty Chin's debt. With Chin closing in for the kill by sending his mistress Dora (played by Dana Lei, that little scene stealer from Bruce Li's "The Image of Bruce Lee," here billed under the pretty name of Shao Yin Yin), to sink her claws into poor San. The audience knows it's only a matter of time before the good man turns bad, inevitably leading to San being forced by the gangsters to go up against his old friend Wong.

The story in the first half, the training/recovery sequence in the middle, and the revenge-a-matic slaughter at the end, are giddily satisfying. But for true fans of the genre "Soul Brothers of Kung Fu" is better than a sum of its parts. The whole damn film achieves an effortless purity of purpose. If you love the genre, it's because of movies like this that you love it. When the machine works, this is what it looks like.

Hwa Yi Hung, here billed as Hwa I Hung, who directed Li in his superior vehicle "Dynamo", as well as most of Billy Chong's early starring vehicles, does a super job in both the action and composition department (there's a beautifully composed shot early on of Lo Meng working at a logging camp, which consists of him eating a sack lunch as forty giant trees float behind him in the sea). The film's only negative is the useless presence of Rodney Allen Rippy lookalike Carl Scott, who's only purpose was to justify American distributor Cinema Shares Int's ebony audience pandering title "Soul Brothers of Kung Fu" (How it escaped being called "Soul Brothers of Bruce Lee" is anybody's guess).

By 1977 the Kung Fu film craze, like the spaghetti western before it, had come and gone in America as far as mainstream popularity was concerned. But while the spaghetti western truly died once it's pop bubble burst, the Kung Fu flick manage to cling to survival, due to its still popular presence in the black community. By that time in America, Kung Fu flicks played almost exclusively in black theaters in

black neighborhoods, downtown all-night grindhouses, and the third title of a drive in's triple feature. And as the seventies came to a close, before the emergence of Jackie Chan, Bruce Li was the only Kung Fu performer who meant anything box office wise in the states.

Over half the martial arts films released during this period, that received legitimate theatrical engagements accompanied by newspaper advertisement support, starred Bruce Li (by the time I saw this at the Carson Twin Cinema the week it came out, I had already seen many flicks starring Bruce Li). Along with Japan's Sonny Chiba, Bruce Li was my favorite Kung Fu actor growing up. I liked him even more then Bruce Lee. One, because I saw way more movies with him, so I really got familiar with him. Two, he was a better actor then Lee (Lee was a pretty good actor, and absolutely dynamic. But Li was better). And considering how many cheap movies he did, his track record was pretty good. "Exit the Dragon, Enter the Tiger," "The Image of Bruce Lee," "The Three Avengers," "Dynamo," "Bruce Lee: The Man – The Myth", "Fist Of Fury 2" and "Fist Of Fury 3". But it's "Soul Brothers of Kung Fu" that's the best of an impressive bunch.

The whole film rests not on the brutal Kung Fu fights but how we feel about Wong (Bruce Li) and San (Lo Meng). The two men prove to be a terrific team and they bring out a depth of feeling from their characters that accumulates power as the film goes on. Lo ("The Kid with the Golden Arm") Meng's sad moral decline as San might be more painful to watch then you're ready for. As is the two former friends' inevitable conclusion combat. Like the final fight to the death between Lace and Maggie in Jack Hill's "Switchblade Sisters," you may be caught off guard by the poignancy of their sad dilemma.

Fatal Needles vs Fatal Fists (1978)

Wong Tao was a popular martial arts matinee idol who starred in many flicks, some of them pretty good, and one, *The Hot, The Cool, & The Vicious*, that's sensational. That being said, I've never been one of his fans. His look is a little too blandly handsome for my taste. While being an okay actor, he didn't possess much charisma. And his roles tended to be of the dull self-righteous hero variety (in a Wong Tao movie, I'm almost always on the villain's side). But of all of his solo vehicles, none show him off the better effect than helmer Lee Tso Nam's (director of the aforementioned The Hot, The Cool, & The Vicious) *Fatal Needles vs Fatal Fists*.

Fedora sporting Lo Lieh (a cool look on him) plays Chow Lung Cap't of the local police, and Wong Tao is his Vice Cap't Ming Who. This dynamic duo is more commonly referred to by their nickname, The Bandit Catchers. A name they earn in Wyatt Earp like fashion by cleaning up the bandit ridden town Tombstone-style, and keeping it clean. A fun opening credit montage shows off the cocky, smart ass, seemingly invincible bandit catchers catching bandits, (it ends with Chow & Ming laughing at their conquests into a freeze frame à la *Starskey & Hutch*).

The duo is challenged by a group of bandits calling themselves The Four Devils (among The Four Devils is a young dialogue-less Sammo Hung wearing what looks like barrettes in his hair). The law enforcement officers vanquish these foes as easily as all the rest, but during the combat Ming accidentally slashes his partner with a butcher knife, resulting in Chow's death. Lo Lieh fans will no doubt be understandably disappointed by his quick picture exit. Especially since his character is so cool. I could of easily watched an entire film of The Bandit Catchers catching bandits. And I would've especially loved to see Lieh's Chow go up against the film's later villain The Mongolian Bandit (Chang Yi).

Alas, it's not meant to be.

When we next see Wong's Ming Who he's in a tavern surrounded by twenty empty wine bottles trying to drink himself to death. The townspeople try to comfort him, and tell him, nobody blames him for Chow's death, but he must stop drinking and take his former partner's position as Police Captain or he'll no longer be their hero. At which point Ming flips the fuck out screaming, I'm not a hero, I'm nobody's hero, I'm a killer!

When we next see Ming he's left his old town and wandered to a new province, again trying to kill himself with alcohol, but this time in a brothel. When the brothel's proprietor Madame Lee (a rich character played by Ling Hwa) confronts this penniless bum about how he intends to pay his bill, he informs her he can't pay. You know what we do to bums who can't pay their bill, she informs him, we break their legs. Good, he says. Break my legs, and my arms too. Then when I'm dead just throw my body in the river. Madam Lee decides to cut this bums ass a break by letting him work in the brothel as a lackey until his bill is paid. When the mistress asks his name, he tells her, I have no name (apparently everyone has heard of Ming Who and his iron fists). So Madam Lee christens him Chin Chi.

Wong's newly named Chin Chi goes about his lowly whorehouse lackey work, serving wine to drunken letches, cleaning up cum, and emptying piss buckets, rather contently. Then a rude group of customers try and humiliate one of the prostitutes that has shown him some kindness. Chin Chi stands up for her, but since he's vowed never to use his fists again, and since he wants to die anyway, he stands motionless while the rascals stab him with butcher knives. His suicidal approach to fighting comes across as bravery to the whorehouse witnesses. Madam Lee proclaims Chin Chi is a hero! Exactly the role he's trying to escape. So, mortally wounded, he flees the brothel, eventually collapsing in front of the house of the local magistrate and his family. It appears Chin Chi didn't almost drop dead in just any town. But this province is the crossroad point that all drug smugglers must pass if they intend to move their merchandise into China.

It seems the elderly magistrate and his son and daughter (Jimmy Lee plays the son), like The Bandit Catchers, have kept the town clean of corruption, bandits, and most of all drug smugglers (exactly how they did this is left open to conjecture. Since the old man doesn't appear to be any sort of a martial arts master, and the brother and sister, while proficient in martial arts, are hardly skilled enough to take on all comers). This righteous household nurses Chin Chi back to health, offering him a job without pay to work off his debt to them. It's at this point into the small hamlet and the motion picture enters Chong Tung AKA The Mongolian Bandit, played by legendary Hong Kong heavy and Lee Van Cleef lookalike Chang Yi.

Chang Yi's villainous turns in martial arts movies are one of the reasons fans of the genre like Kung Fu flicks in the first place. To me the four greatest villains of the old school Kung Fu flick era were Lo Lieh number one (the finest classical actor of their entire film industry), Chang Yi & Hwang Jing Lee would be tied for second and third, and Avenging Eagle's Ku Feng would be fourth. The fact that Chang Yi & Hwang Jing Lee would be tied is not surprising, since they're practically

interchangeable. Not only did they both specialize in the Eagle's Claw animal style fighting technique (in the west Chang Yi's signature role being To Mo Hu in Eagle's Claw & Hwang Jing Lee's would be his Ying Jow Pai in Invincible Armour), they both look like each other, they both look like Lee Van Cleef, and they both really look like each other when they wear white wigs. The difference between the two are minor. Hwang Jing Lee is probably the better fighter (his kicks are amazing). And (according to Yuen Wo Ping) both on screen and off, Lee is the most nastily evil of the two (he did kick out Jacky Chan's front teeth in Snakefist in Eagle's Shadow). While Chang Yi is probably the better actor. But depending on the role or the film that opinion could be reversed. The other biggest difference being, except for his self-directed Hitman in the Hand of Buddha, Hwang Jing Lee was always the heavy.

Where Chang Yi was such a beloved staple of the martial arts genre, he, like his western brothers Jack Palance & Robert Ryan, played heroes as well as heavies. As in Wang Yu's *Three The Hard Way*-like *Dragon Squad*, Golden Harvest's sloppy but seminal *Super ManChu*, as the hapless target of invincible Angela Mao's vengeance in the great *Deep Thrust*, and in what many think is his best starring vehicle *Fast Sword* with Sammo Hung.

But it will always be for his villainous turns that Chang Yi holds a place in my genre loving heart. His picture stealing performance in *Shaolin Iron Claws*, his evil eunuch in *The Traitorous*, and the Van Cleef looking Chang Yi playing the Van Cleef role in *Seven Commandments of Kung Fu*, a martial arts remake of Lee Van Cleef's spaghetti western classic *Day of Anger*. But his best roles were always for Lee Tso Nam (affectionately known by his fans as The Master Blaster!). Whether it be Chang Yi's white haired baddie in *Eagle's Claw, Challenge to Death* (Lee's sequel to his career best *The Hot, The Cool, and The Vicious*), *Shaolin Invincible Sticks,* or Chang Yi's performance as crime kingpin The Baron in Lee Tso Nam's first of many films with Bruce Li *Exit The Dragon, Enter The Tiger* (in his own voice in the Cantonese version Chang Yi's even better). In this picture as the cruel, but business-like tyrant, Chong Tung, Chang Yi adds another splendid contribution to his rogues' gallery of evil Kung Fu fighting fuckers.

Chong Tung and his entourage, including his champion for hire, the film's fight director, the incredible oddball Tommy Lee, intend to move a vast amount of drugs through the town into China. Chong warns the magistrate to stay out of their way. Either cooperate or die. Wong Tao's Chin Chi witnesses all of this and doesn't lift a finger to help, even when the sickly old man magistrate is beaten within a inch of his life by Tommy Lee. Branding him in the eyes of everyone in the town as a

coward. And from that point on he's actually referred to as The Coward Chin Chi (a good title for the film).

Naturally this goes on for awhile till something finally makes Chin Chi show his true colors and his fatal fists. The Shane-like scene where The Coward Chin Chi finally fights back against the bullies who work for Chong, is a crowd pleasing pure movie moment that's worth the wait. From that point on, like the title suggests, it's Wong Tao's Fatal Fists vs Chang Yi's deadly secret weapon, his Fatal Needles (as in acupuncture needles that freeze you once stuck by them. And only the evil Chong can remove without causing death).

Everything about this production is first rate, starting with Lee Tso Nam's longtime screenwriter Cheung San Yee's well-written script (in both plotting and dialogue). The Master Blaster's expressive camera. Ling Hwa's Madam Lee is given an elegant introduction by director Lee in a long tracking shot that takes her from one end of the brothel to the other, shot through hanging beads and paper walls, without a cut (What one of Paul Thomas Anderson's long tracking shots might look like if he used a zoom lens instead of a steadicam). And an excellent cast of familiar faces (as usual Tommy Lee is a hoot. If Chang Yi was martial arts cinema's answer to Lee Van Cleef, then Tommy Lee most definitely was its Klaus Kinski). The film also boasts very effectively used needle drops from Pino Donaggio's score from Carrie.

The final fight between Chang Yi and Wong Tao is as dynamic as any film that dares to use vs in its title ought to be. Made all the better by The Master Blaster's decision, after playing everything up to that point fairly naturalistically, to place the final conflict on a theatrical set straight out of a Peking Opera.

When Fatal Needles vs Fatal Fists played Los Angeles originally in '78 or '79, it was on the bottom half of a Kung Fu triple feature (it played at The Tower Theatre in Downtown LA, and where I saw it at The Carson Twin Cinema) with The Soul Of Bruce Lee starring Sonny Chiba, and Wai Man Chan's starring heroic vehicle The Bravest Fist. But in its only LA theatrical engagement it played under the dopey title of Kung Fu Hercules due to a minor fat minion of Chong Tung. Obviously meant to confuse urban audiences that they were seeing Bolo Yung's popular flick Chinese Hercules.

Return of the Tiger (1978)

Despite having the same lead actor (Bruce Li), and director (Lee Tso Nam, under his Jimmy Shaw pseudonym), and many of the same cast members, Return of the Tiger isn't a sequel to Bruce Li's earlier Los Angeles hit with the ebony-kung fu loving crowd, Dimension Pictures' Exit the Dragon, Enter the Tiger. But trash flick distributor 21st Century Distribution sure wants you to think it is. Hence the sound alike name, though the story and characters are different, and there's nobody in the flick named Tiger!

Return of the Tiger stars Bruce Li (one of cinema's snazziest dressers this side of Burt Reynolds and Richard Roundtree) as a finally revealed cop who is out to bring down the round western mob boss Mr. Paul (aka The Big Westerner) played by flown-in western actor Paul L. Smith (the torturer from Midnight Express, and the then upcoming Altman film Popeye as Bluto). Smith's Mr. Paul brings to mind in both look and persona Marvel comics The Kingpin in The Daredevil comic books. Bruce Li poses as a hit man to get in with Smith's criminal organization. In this effort he's joined by none other than queen of the seventies female fight superstars – the Deadly China Doll herself – Angela Mao (here billed in the opening credits under her real name, Mao Ying) and coming out of retirement apparently to play this routine Special Guest Star role. Martial Arts legend and mainstay Chang Yi (here billed as Chang I.) shows up as well in a nothing part.

Li, who has genuine star charisma (maybe even more than his namesake Lee) is annoyingly absent for a good portion of the action, as supporting actors and subplots abound, and random action (some of it quite well-staged) that has nothing to do with the plot, keeps overtaking the movie for stretches at a time – i.e. in the form of karate school fights (students we don't know fight other students we don't know for ten minutes). More than one scene plays in the movie only to abruptly be cut off before its conclusion, leaving the audience screaming, What happened?

The film has a large roster of familiar Hong Kong cinema faces (all of them in Exit the Dragon, Enter the Tiger) playing minor villains, Fu-Hsiung Cheng plays his usual part of a giant, fat, dim-witted minion of Mr. Paul's named Fat Tom (though with more screen time than usual), some twin bodyguards, a cool daddy-o named Mr. Wong (Hsing Hsieh, who comes across as a Jack Palance type), the leaders of the rival smack dealers (Han Hsieh and Fei Lung), and Fei Wang plays his stock role of nervous traitor Yu Ching. But the actors playing the heroes – Bruce Li and Angela Mao – seem to be working part time, as if all the big names on this

production made it concurrently with another project they obviously cared more about. But while it's frustrating that we don't see more of the main characters (Li, Mao, Smith, and Chang), this allows the minions of the various camps much more screen time. And some of these scenes featuring the minions are the film's most memorable, especially Fei Wang's betrayal by Bolo Yeung and his other colleagues. This emphasis on the role of the individual minions in this crime story, even if it's more by necessity than desire, lends this whole gangster saga a nuance similar tales don't possess. But even the film's unique rhythm inside of its choppy editing structure (the English language print seems to strive esthetically for the flow of a choppy, spliced to shit, drive-in 35mm garbage film print), can't set you up properly for the film's spectacular climax.

Nobody does climatic fight to the death battle royals like 'The Master Blaster' Lee Tso Nam.

But The Master Blaster never did one like this before.

Up to the film's climatic Kung Fu battle, Paul L. Smith's performance as Mr. Paul is amusingly awkward. Like most white actors from other countries that appear in Hong Kong films, he appears completely bewildered by their way of movie making. He spends the whole movie glowering behind a thick bushy black beard, usually behind giant square plastic sunglasses, or blinking nervously minus the sunglasses, holding a cigar in his puffy sausage fingers, wearing a collection of John Travolta inspired black and white leisure suits similar to the one from Saturday Night Fever, shyly barking out orders in a thin South African accent obviously dubbed by another. Most of the film he seems way over his head. And you resent that Chang Yi, who returns from Exit the Dragon, Enter the Tiger, where he practically stole the show as that film's main baddie The Baron, is reduced to playing Smith's right-hand man/lackey.

However, once Lee Tso Nam brings the entire ridiculously large cast of villains and henchmen together, some we even know by name (Hi Tom! Hi Mr. Wong!), and then rings the bell that sets them killing each other in a last man standing bloody murder Battle Royal, the film captures that same comic book Jack Kirby essence that Wang Yu's climaxes achieve, only – if such a thing is possible – more so.

And the "more so" part all has to do with Paul Smith and how The Master Blaster uses him in the final fight. The whole movie has been heading for this fight. While the film up to now has been an entertaining but choppy experience, the idea of a Bruce Li vs Paul Smith gigantic battle has been enticing. Probably more than

anything else, because since Paul Smith isn't a martial artist, they're going to be forced to stage and choreograph it differently. Probably, concentrate on Smith's (like The Kingpin and like Bluto) superhuman strength, but since that strength hadn't been demonstrated all movie long, nobody knew what to expect. Nor did we know would Smith be able to pull off the choreography, and if we had to judge by his performance in the film thus far, the answer would appear to be no. But then the fight starts, and Smith's Mr. Paul starts tearing guys apart, not like a master in a Kung Fu film, but like a kaiju in a Ishiro Honda Japanese monster movie, or like Jack Kirby's The Thing in one of his Marvel Team-Up donnybrooks.

Which in retrospect shouldn't be so surprising. For years Smith was one half of a team in Italian flicks called (Michael) Coby and (Paul) Smith, which were to (Terrence) Hill and (Bud) Spencer, what (Duke) Mitchell and (Sammy) Petrillo were to (Dean) Martin and (Jerry) Lewis, with even one of their terrible rip-off acrobatic comedy action films, getting a stateside release under the misleading redneck-Reynolds sounding title Convoy Buddies. And like those Hill and Spencer shot-in-Miami monstrosities, these Colby and Smith films were basically fight films, just done in that acrobatic comedic style that all Italian action films ultimately succumbed to.

So Paul Smith – as a Bud Spencer impersonator – was actually already a fight star. And the main reason that Smith ends up stealing the movie is due to the aplomb he demonstrates executing Lee Tso Nam's choreography. Which means he fights in the climax like a superhuman strength Bud Spencer, again, which makes him slightly resemble The Thing. This climax was theirs to fuck up. And they not only don't fuck it up, they deliver one of the most enjoyable last ten minutes to any feature I saw that year.

Rhythm Heritage's Theme from S.W.A.T. is sliced and diced into the opening credit music and a cover of Nowhere to Run To from The Warriors has a scene cleverly cut to it.

Despite or because of choppy print presentation, a brisk 88 minutes. An enjoyable (C)

Postscript: More than anything else, the thing that Return of the Tiger is most known for now, is how it so thoroughly bested Robert Altman's Popeye that was released only one month later, and featured Smith as Popeye's classic antagonist Bluto. Part of the prerelease publicity surrounding Altman's Popeye was that the climax would contain one of the greatest cinematic fights of all time. Truly absurd for anyone who has sat through Altman's awful atrocity on the memory of Segar's sailor man creation. Even though every cartoon knew to end with a big Popeye vs Bluto fight, where Popeye wins due to eating his spinach, Altman perversely denies the audience this cathartic climax.

Apparently, Altman's fumbling of Popeye's final act was the bridge too far on his genre nose-thumbing Hollywood studio filmmaking career. Popeye was a joint venture of both Disney and Paramount, so when Altman fucked the audience on that picture, he fucked Disney and Paramount both. It didn't matter that the film did well. They so hated what Altman delivered to them, which was so different from both what they wanted and what he promised to make, that studios refused to hire him for the next two decades. Altman, like Goddard, doesn't want to just upturn expectations, he wants to cynically piss on them (just to be a fucker, Altman's Popeye doesn't even like spinach. What?). However, The Master Blaster's final Destroy All Monsters meets The Thing Marvel Team-Up with Shang Chi battle of Return of the Tiger delivers where Pot Head-Altman disappoints.

And on the same bill at The Carson Twin Cinema (as well as all over town).

Fists of Bruce Lee (1978)

Fists of Bruce Lee is a lighter toned 1978 item, with Bruce (director as well) Li (eventually revealed, again, as an Interpol agent) posing as an electronic surveillance expert, who's given access to a reclusive gangster's estate in order to install a security system. Like Return of the Tiger, two different gangs with an army of minions, played by a large cast of familiar Hong Kong film faces, take up almost half of the running time. Including one blonde surfer Californian in tight white pants that's pretty memorable (as opposed to Lo Leigh, who in this film is completely forgettable).

During Li's snooping, a bit of a romantic relationship develops between the reclusive mobster's feisty daughter (Mei-Ling Lin) and Bruce. The reclusive mobster has a fey, nervous, sweaty lawyer, who seemed to base his performance on Rod Steiger's similar in persona turn as Mr. Joyboy in Tony Richardson's The Loved One. And like Mr. Joyboy had a romantic obsession with Miss Thanatogenous, so does the mobster's lawyer have with the mobster's daughter. So his reaction when he sees Lin and Li making out brought down the house at The Carson Twin Cinema (the only time during the silent show I realized I wasn't alone). Which in turn leads to an unsuccessful and pathetic rape attempt by the lawyer (no nudity, and no reason for an R rating). I'm not sure why Bruce Li wanted to star in this movie, no less direct the fucking thing. But the carelessness in the fashioning of the English language version is really bottom of the barrel. Especially, all the terrible non actors dubbing the Hong Kong performers into English. With the geeky goon dubbing Bruce Li absolutely the worst.

The choppy print was 91 monotonous minutes.

On the plus side, the film has cleverly and memorably placed needle-drops. A very effective use of Lalo Shiffrin's score from Enter the Dragon, that dare I say is used more effectively than the Clouse original, the instrumental section of the Live and Let Die Theme, and talk about your funky seventies scores, the film's opening and closing theme is a cover of Average White Band's Pick Up The Pieces.

The music alone rises it to an (D-).

The Image of Bruce Lee (1978)

Bruce Li and 21st Century Distribution Company strike again. Both Bruce Li and 21st Century kept kung fu flicks alive in the waning days of the genre before the emergence of Jackie Chan. What sets this one apart is this time Bruce Li is joined by John Chang, star of *Snake in Monkey's Shadow* (one of my all time favorite kung fu flicks and one of my most treasured 35mm film prints), as an antagonist co-lead.

A shipment of counterfeit U.S. currency has flooded Hong Kong. The authorities believe the culprits behind the bogus bills are the Han Family, lead by the father (Yin-Chieh Han) and his son Steven (John Chang, not wearing his usual bangs, and practically unrecognizable due to that fact). As well as an out of town gang of Japanese counterfeiters led by Bolo (Chinese Hercules) Yeung, in one of his better roles, as the amusingly nicknamed "The Hakido Bear".

Hi Chi (Bruce Li), a cop for special squad, and his mustache-wearing partner Lai (Chang Lei), affectionately called "Mustache," are sent to tail the gangsters in hopes of their leading them to the counterfeit plates. Well, if by tail, you mean start a fight with them every chance they get, Chi & Mustache get right to work.

Meanwhile the Han's niece Donna (Dana Lei), who lives in Japan, has flown to Hong Kong carrying the paper needed to print a new batch of bills. But when negotiations between the two different gangster clans become heated, Donna, Fistful of Dollars-style, begins playing one group against the other.

The story is divided between the machinations involved in the Han's printing a new batch of bills and the two cops tailing, chasing, and fighting them. Like many a Hong Kong movie, the cops come off more brutal then the crooks. Mustache even threatens to burn down a crowded night club unless the owner supplies him with information. And since there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the cops investigation, our interest and sympathy moves to the more interesting Han family of counterfeiters. Especially Donna, who emerges as one of martial art films' rare femme fatales. This Veronica Lake-inspired creation has all the best dialogue, whether she's double crossing the two counterfeit gangs, wrapping Bolo Yeung around her little finger, seducing cousin Steven into her bed, or flirting with Chi and Mustache (it's she who dubs Lai Mustache). Dana Lei dominates the film with her attitude, outlandish wardrobe, and generous helping of full frontal female nudity (not so usual in a kung fu flick).

While it maybe lacking in the script department, and the fights, though good, are usually unprovoked and undramatic, the cast is good. John Chang has about as much screen time as Bruce Li and comes across as a legitimate co-lead, raising the stakes when the two finally face off for a final showdown on a beach. Both Bruce and his partner Chang Lei match up well, and they even try and develop a Hawksian rivalry over Donna that, if more time was spent on the cop story, could have paid off more. Bruce doesn't have much of a character this time around but he fights good and looks sensational in his seventies fashions. In fact, the whole film sports better seventies style fashions than usual in a Hong Kong film.

And just as the unmotivated fights begin to become tedious, a terrific end fight between Bruce and Old Man Han caps the film off excitingly. The film also starts with a funny little scene (gallows humor) of Bruce trying to save a man from jumping off a building, that I've never forgotten since I saw the film in 1978. The rest of the film I forgot, but not that opening grim joke. Even Kevin Thomas of the Los Angeles Times mentioned it in his review. Oh btw, the film, as per usual, has nothing to do with Bruce Lee.

Death Force (1978)

Reviewed by Quentin Tarantino and Jim Sheldon

(Caprican Three) Death Force re-unites genial, beefy black third-string action star James (Angels, Hard As They Come) Iglehart and producer-director Cirio H. Santiago (they both did 1973's Savage! and 1974's Bamboo Gods and Iron Men together) in a unique blend of a Filipino blaxploitation/revengeamatic and a samurai slice-em-up, filmed around 1976 in the Philippines and Los Angeles.

Three Vietnam veterans, Iglehart, Leon Isaac (Kennedy, later of Penitentiary 1,2,& 3 and the surprisingly entertaining Body and Soul remake for Cannon Pictures), and Carmen (The Hot Box) Argenziano (now bald, but still loud and snarling), in South East Asia, have become black market gold smugglers (they sell their gold to Filipino trash flick mainstay Vic Diaz). As the smugglers escape the law by boat, Isaac and Argenziano decide that splitting their ill-gotten gains two ways is much more preferable than three.

So they slash Iglehart's throat and chest and dump him in the sea. He miraculously washes ashore on a deserted island where two Japanese soldiers, who still think World War 2 is going on, nurse him back to health. The two, an officer speaking rudimentary English (Joe Mari Avellana) and the other a jealous flunky (Joonee Gamboa), have killed all previous strays to the isle, but Avellana's senior soldier shows Inglehart the tricks of the bushido blade trade, and a very engaging relationship develops between the two men (Avellana, Santiago's regular production designer – despite a horrendous old-age make up job – delivers a sensational performance).

Interspersed with these training scenes, back in LA, Isaac and Argenziano start climbing to the top of the Los Angeles gangster pyramid, by wiping out all competition (including one victim blasted outside Hollywood's World Theatre, where I first saw the film!). On his own, Isaac menaces Iglehart's wife, Jayne (The Muthers) Kennedy, who he wants for his own (in real life Isaac was Kennedy's husband, and her son is played by Iglehart's real-life lumpy infant). The duplicitous gangster tells Kennedy that her husband is dead. Then black balls her from getting work as a bar singer unless she becomes his woman (the reason she can't land a singing job is supposed to be due to Isaac's interference, but it also might be because the stunning Kennedy can't sing a lick).

Meanwhile, back on the island, rescue comes, but the senior Japanese officer, despondent over the accidental death of his aide, after killing a few rescuers, chooses harakiri (you'll feel sorry to see him go). Now rescued from the island, and armed with his samurai sword, as well as his new-found samurai-skills, Inglehart hits LA, slashing his way – vengeance style – through his former partners' crime organization, including cutting off Argenziano's head and sending it to Isaac in a box (the blade-swinging choreography is quite good).

Kennedy, who thought her husband was dead, is reunited with Iglehart in a cool scene I swiped for Django and Broomhilda's reunion ("It's me, baby"). But then Kennedy, her son and his wife's roomie are all kidnapped by Isaac to Mexico. Up until now, the film has been rather PG-worthy, but the last couple of reels bring in some delicious, near-X-worthy decapitations (several Isaac minions), and a crowd-cheering bushido blade disembowelment death for the reprehensible Isaac. Jaime Mendoza-Nava helmed the music (including one too many plays of that MOR stand-by, "Whispering Your Name").

The 97 minutes allow time for more characterization than is usual in these things, and Iglehart (as per usual) makes a solid, macho, empathetic blaxploitation lead. The supporting cast includes Robert Gonzales and Armando Federico.

Filipino trash – with a touch of class. (B-).

Big Wednesday (1978)

While all in all I prefer Milius' directorial debut "Dillinger," it's hard to argue against the idea that his surfer epic "Big Wednesday" isn't his classic.

The film revolves around three surfer buddies in the sixties, Matt (Jan-Michael Vincent), Barlow (William Katt), and Leroy the Masochist (Gary Busey) – all perfectly cast – who in their day riding the waves on the beaches of Southern California, were gods. But then, as is the case with most Milius characters, their day passes and they're forced back down to earth to live among the mortals.

Milius takes his story from his own surfer youth during the same time period. Yet Milius doesn't strive for realism in his depiction of the trio. Instead he presents it just short of Arthurian Legend. It treats these guys (who Milius later quipped, "All became drug dealers") as both mystic knights and over-the-hill Wild Bunch Basterds. Men who got what it takes at the moment of reckoning to distinguish themselves. Be it a hundred-man army of Mexican soldiers or the skyscraper-like swells of Big Wednesday.

Except for "Big Wednesday," none of the Milius-directed films have a satisfying conclusion. And the climactic showdown between the heroic trio and the monster waves is so good it makes up for the rest (the trio's "Wild Bunch" inspired walk to destiny is by far Milius' finest cinematic moment). Before that moment arrives, the film offers a rather oddball structure. Yet for the most part every oddball thing Milius throws in the movie works despite itself. A lengthy episode in Tijuana that has nothing to do with the theme, is still exciting. A long interlude about the death of a secondary character, Waxer (Darrell Fetty), ends up moving even though nobody in the audience gives a shit about that guy.

More than any other movie Milius directed, "Big Wednesday" contains the joy of filmmaking (he waited his whole career to make this movie). It also illustrates the problems with many of his other movies. Which by contrast seem to contain the frustration of filmmaking.

In its day "Big Wednesday" never found its audience during its original release (it was one of three beach movies that came out the same year, "California Dreaming" with Dennis Christopher & Crown International's "Malibu Beach"). After the film opened soft, Milius even considered going back in to re-edit it (as if that would help). However, in the eighties via surfer screenings and midnight shows from

California's Hermosa Beach to Australia's Palm Beach, "Big Wednesday" became one of the most beloved films by the subculture it sought to depict.

Back when I worked at the beach community video store Video Archives, "Big Wednesday" was the most requested film not yet released on home video (Led Zeppelin's "The Song Remains the Same" was the second).

Escape From Alcatraz (1979)

Escape from Alcatraz, a film I didn't like when it came out — I'm sure it was just too dry for the seventeen year old me, proved both fascinating and exhilarating on a re-view a few years ago. Cinematically speaking, it's Siegel's most expressive film. During his days in New Hollywood, while no Corbucci or Peckinpah , Siegel shot some terrific action scenes. The final fatal shootout for Richard Widmark's Madigan. The pool hall fight (a real showstopper) in Coogan's Bluff. The entire school bus sequence in Dirty Harry, as well as that film's action introduction of hot dog Harry vs. The Black Panthers (the scene suffers a little now due to its obvious backlot quality. Are they in San Francisco or Hazzard County?).

The machine gun shootout in The Black Windmill (explosions of muzzle flash, bullet casings, and splintered wood). The actual action part of the bank robbery in Charley Varrick. The attack of Henry Bascomb of Bascomb Auto Repair (Siegel regular John Mitchum), the first of the sleeper agents that Donald Plesance wakes up in Telefon. Yet unlike Leone, Peckinpah, Hyams, and De Palma, Siegel never engaged in cinematic set pieces, until the beautiful, practically wordless opening sequence of Escape from Alcatraz. The sequence not only takes its time, it seems to go back in time. On one hand, it feels like the no-nonsense fifties Siegel of Baby Face Nelson & Crime in the Streets – though tellingly, not like the docu-style of Riot in Cell Block 11.

But on the other hand, never before and never again would Siegel engage in this type of cinematic bravura. From Eastwood's first appearance as Frank Morris, being led off the ferry in the pouring rain onto the isolated island in his raincoat. To the older but still virile Eastwood (who looks as if he's been chipped from granite rock as much as the penitentiary) being walked into processing in his old school grey suit (back in the day when people went to prison in suits and it wasn't a statement), being made to strip while the prison doctor examines his mouth like livestock. To being marched naked through the cell block (brilliant), the sound of his bare feet slapping out a rhythm against the cold concrete floor that echoes against the stone walls of The Rock. To the final moment when Morris is placed in his cage, the cell door is slammed shut, and the guard says the first real line in the film; "Welcome to Alcatraz" , punctuated by a Mario Bava-like thunder clap and lightning bolt. "Bravo!"

His next film after the critical and financial success of Escape from Alcatraz would be his Burt Reynolds caper comedy Rough Cut (if only Siegel had retired then, like

Phil Karlson did with Framed, he would have ended his career on an iconic high point). On that film Siegel would end up getting fired by the producers, and writer Larry (tv's M*A*S*H) Gelbart would have his name removed from the credits. In Burt Reynolds' autobiography he mentions the elderly Siegel spent half the movie asleep in his chair. And when you see Rough Cut, you can believe it (that may be the reason he was fired). But as the opening sequence in the Eastwood picture proved, not only was the old man wide awake, but fully engaged, and inspired to test his craftsmanship and technique. I suspect the reason for Siegel's full engagement on the Alcatraz picture, as opposed to Telefon before it, and Rough Cut after, was on the Eastwood picture Siegel had something to lose.

What do I mean by that? We'll get into that in a minute, but first, leaving Escape from Alcatraz for a moment, let's discuss his Charles Bronson espionage picture prior to the Eastwood prison drama. Why would Siegel waste his time on the three-quarters-boring, one-quarter-silly (the best part) Telefon? As Willie Sutton might say; the money, stupid.

This was bore out when I recently met the films producer, Kubrick's former partner James B. Harris. When I asked him why he and Siegel did Telefon, he said they didn't like the script but felt one gains opportunity by working, not by not working.

For most of the seventies the two action stars that ruled the globe were Eastwood and Bronson. In America, the third was Burt Reynolds, who, for a time (at home) eclipsed both Clint and Charlie. So much so, they both tried to do their own version of a comedic Burt Reynolds-like action flick.

Breakout for Bronson (good), and Every Which Way But Loose for Clint (abysmal but successful). But Burt's films, while they did great in the states, and killed in the south, never traveled well in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa as the Eastwood and Bronson pictures did. In Europe that third spot would go to either Franco Nero or Alain Delon, depending on the year. In Japan it would be Takakura Ken. The only real serious threat to Bronson and Eastwood's dominance would come from Hong Kong's Bruce Lee. But his untimely death stopped the competition before it ever really got started. Believe it or not, even Christopher Mitchum was a big noise in Spain, due to his pretty decent Spanish revenge picture Summertime Killer, directed by Spaniard action maestro Antonio Isasi. But by the end of the seventies, Bronson was looking a little long in the tooth – little did we know then that Bronson still had more than a decade of action films in front of him. So by the time he did his best picture during his tenure at Cannon Pictures, J. Lee Thompson's delightfully lurid Kinjite (the movie where Charlie shoves a dildo

up a guy's ass in the first scene), it looks like an action picture starring The Terror-era Boris Karloff. But during the time that Burt Reynolds was kicking ass with Gator, Smokey and the Bandit, and Hooper.

While Eastwood was laying waste with The Outlaw Josey Wales, The Enforcer, and The Gauntlet, Bronson was getting passé with mediocre efforts like St. Ives, Breakheart Pass, and The White Buffalo (Breakheart Pass is much better than The White Buffalo). In an effort on the studio's part to keep Bronson from getting marginalized, they wisely deduced that it wasn't Bronson's age that was sapping his energy – considering how old he was, he looked remarkably good back then – it was his habit of working with tired old hacks like J. Lee Thompson (I love Thompson and Bronson's Cannon Pictures of the eighties but their seventies movies are lackluster), and Tom Gries (how did Ted Post miss the call?).

The last Bronson film to make any real noise as a movie was his excellent turn in future action auteur Walter Hill's first film Hard Times. At some point Bronson being comfortable on the set became more important than the movie, hence working time and time again with his wife Jill Ireland, and helmers like J. Lee & Gries. So in an effort to resuscitate Bronson's waning career in the mainstream of commercial Hollywood filmmaking, action master and Eastwood mentor Don Siegel was brought in to pump some life into "the ugly one" (one of Charlie's nicknames in Italy).

Unfortunately it sorta worked the other way around. In his autobiography Siegel recounts his Telefon experience with Bronson was prickly and the script was stupid. Which reveals all you need to know about the take-the-money-and-run aspect of the endeavor. The wacky Manchurian Candidate-like story tells the tale that in the Cold War fifties, Russia planted a bunch of deep cover sleeper agents in America near important military installations. The sleeper agents don't know who they are, they've been brainwashed into believing they're Americans. But when a certain Robert Frost poem is recited to them, it triggers their assignment, and they suicidally sabotage military targets. The plan is abandoned by the Russians and the sleeper agents are left where they are to live out the rest of their lives as Americans.

Until thirty years later, an evil rouge Russian mastermind named Dalchimsky (played by Donald Pleasence), with a hard on for the world, has a list of names and is calling them on the telephone (hence the title) setting them off. Bronson plays KGB agent Grigori Borzov and Lee Remick plays a CIA agent who join forces to

stop and kill Dalchimsky (the only reason that Pleasence doesn't just call all the agents in one hour, is that if he did, there'd be no movie).

As I said, the idea is wacky. In fact the Zucker Brother's did a takeoff on it in one of the Leslie Nielsen Naked Gun movies and didn't bother to add any jokes. But just because the premise is nutty doesn't mean it's bad. In fact, it's far out enough that in the right hands, it could have been a stone gas. But those right hands definitely didn't belong to old fart Siegel, who blew the picture's chance for success by de-emphasizing the kooky elements and emphasizing the dull ones. Siegel not only wasted his time, he wasted the Stirling Silliphant and Peter Hyams (who should have directed) script. The scenes where the sleeper agents are activated are a blast (almost all Siegel regulars: Mitchum, Sheree North, and Roy Jenson). And as stated before, Donald Pleasence, as he is in all of his Siegel pictures, is terrific. Not to mention his reading of the Robert Frost trigger poem, once heard, is never forgotten.

DALCHIMSKY:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep.
Remember Nikolai, miles to go before you sleep.

But in his book, Siegel admits to finding the plot dumb, so naturally tried to not feature it. I've always wondered why the film starts out such fun, only to turn into a snooze once Bronson and Remick enter the picture. So MGM's idea of bringing in a big director gun to keep Bronson vital was a bust. After this film Bronson would forever be banished to 2nd tier status.

So while Siegel took the money and ran on Telefon, and took the money and slept on Rough Cut, Escape from Alcatraz gave him one last artistic erection. And, as I said before, on this prison film Siegel had something to lose…. his reputation.

With Richard Tuggle's taut minimalist script, he had the best material for a cracking good picture in awhile. Siegel was also returning to the playing fields of two of his biggest past triumphs, the prison picture, and a Clint Eastwood picture. The old lion always made it very clear he considered his docu-styled prison fifties muckraker Riot in Cell Block 11 as his first real movie. I, happen to be, a huge fan of Siegel's first film, the Sydney Greenstreet-starring vehicle The Verdict (not to be

confused with the Sidney Lumet courtroom drama). Not only is it an entertaining programmer in its own right, it predates the misdirection that lies at the heart of Siegel's storytelling strategy, as well as the law officer who takes the law into his own hands to see justice served ala Dirty Harry (as well as other Siegel law enforcement protagonists). From the perspective of an auteurist critic, it's a wonderful first work.

But in regards to a picture that's technique and intensity rises to the top of its field – be it prison pictures, fifties crime films, or old movies playing late at night on local television – Riot in Cell Block 11 is hard to beat. With this film, not only did the Siegel reputation begin, so did his penchant for violence and brutality, and his talent for (when left to his own devices) excellent casting.

Scary Neville Brand (the second highest decorated solider in World War II after Audie Murphy), and even scarier Leo Gordon (who, while continuing to act into the seventies, made quite a successful second career for himself as a go-to script writer for B-Movie maestros – Roger Corman: The Wasp Woman, Tower of London, The Terror, Gene Corman: Tobruk, You Can't Win 'Em All, & William Witney: The Cat Burglar, Valley of The Redwoods) have as much to do with Riot in Cell Block 11 success as Eastwood does with "Escape From Alcatraz".

But, finally, the reason for Riot in Cell Block 11's reputation is simple, it was the best prison movie ever made. In his autobiography, Siegel speaks of Escape From Alcatraz scribe Richard Tuggle telling him that Riot in Cell Block 11 was his favorite prison film.

But Escape from Alcatraz was also his first collaboration with Eastwood since their phenomenal success with Dirty Harry (it would also be their last). Magnum Force was written for Siegel (Ted Post did it), and Eastwood offered Don Every Which Way But Loose, which he said he turned down because he didn't think Clint could pull it off (it turned out to be Eastwood's biggest hit up to that time…. ugh).

But after a few films with other stars, Matthau, Michael Caine, Bronson, and John Wayne, this was a return to the kind of picture the old man did best, with the actor he did it best with. There would be no sleeping in the chair on this movie. A bad movie from this script would not only signal the old dog was washed up, it would tarnish both the memory of Riot in Cell Block 11 and Dirty Harry, and Siegel's privileged place as the man who understands Eastwood – not to mention by this time, as much as Clint respected Don, if Siegel fell asleep in his chair on the Alcatraz set, he'd probably wake up to find Eastwood directing the picture.

Eastwood, from the very beginning, always had a clear understanding of his own iconic persona, and so did Siegel. No other director, including Leone – judging by the harsh, insulting remarks Sergio made at Clint's expense during the publicity for Once Upon A Time in America – understood Eastwood better, nor did Eastwood trust anybody with his carefully crafted persona the way he trusted Don Siegel.

Siegel and Eastwood were always in clever cahoots with how they exploited Clint's iconic image. First as a handsome young stud in Coogan's Bluff and The Beguiled, then away from westerns into urban crime dramas with Dirty Harry. With Harry Callahan, Eastwood was brought up to date, and the only true western heir to John Wayne was turned into the quintessential cop of the seventies, the decade where cops replaced cowboys as the action film heroes of choice. And in Escape From Alcatraz, yet again, Siegel and Eastwood had a new plateau to break through to. An older, middle-aged Eastwood. And as was their way, they exploited the hell out of it. Eastwood's naked walk through the corridors of Alcatraz is simply a thing of cinematic beauty. But it's highly doubtful Eastwood would have trusted this type of imagery with the other directors he was working with at the time, James Fargo and Buddy Van Horn.

And while I don't know this for a fact, my guess is Eastwood might have been too self-conscious (i.e. embarrassed) to direct himself in a scene like that. By this time in their collaboration, many of the creative decisions are the joint decisions of two simpatico minds. I can imagine Eastwood and Siegel in a script meeting discussing how long can they go in the picture before Frank Morris says his first line. Then how few lines can he speak after that. How few lines can all the characters speak, except for Patrick McGoohan's loquacious and sadistic warden. And speaking of iconic persona manipulation, McGoohan tweaks his own. The former Prisoner (Number Six) trapped on an island prison, is now in control of the most famous island prison since Devils Island. Only this time McGoohan gets to play "Number Two".

And his opening speech to Eastwood's prisoner; "We don't make citizens in Alcatraz, but we do make good prisoners," echoes the speech Patrick Cargill's Number Two gives McGoohan in episode 23, "Hammer Into Anvil." What's so intriguing about the way Siegel opens the picture is that as bravura as it is, it also has a starkness – I'd describe it as a cool boil – that seems appropriate for the film's period setting.

A genuine stylistic prison film precursor to Escape From Alcatraz is the first film of the fourteen film Japanese action film series Abashiri Bangaichi (1965) starring Japan's answer to Eastwood, Takakura Ken, and directed by Ken's Siegel, Teruo Ishii. This stark stylistic black and white snow-set prison escape adventure is a perfect companion piece to the Siegel and Eastwood endeavor (it's highly unlikely Siegel would have ever seen Abashiri Bangaich but not unthinkable that Eastwood may have viewed it for its possible remake potential).

Since all these World War II era directors have moved on to that great honey wagon in the sky, period films would never be the same. When George Roy Hill shoots The Sting, or Brian De Palma shoots The Untouchables, or Martin Scorsese shoots The Aviator, the period recreation is half the point (in The Age of Innocence, it's the whole point). An exception to this rule was Jonathan Demme's wartime recreation of Los Angeles in the film Swing Shift. It managed to look right, I'd even say spot on, without being either a production or costume designer showcase.

The von Sternbergian exception of my peers was Sofia Coppola's Marie Antoinette, maybe the most bravura costume-designed film since her father's Dracula (by no less then Milena Canonero, who's practically an auteur herself). But since the subtextual implications of the story underneath the historical record spoke so personally to the princess director, it had the effect of both modernizing the emotions, illustrating an inner truth, and revealing every other attempt at capturing the French Revolution on screen as either a history lesson or wax museum tableaux (Anthony Mann's film noir-ish Reign of Terror aside). Now this truth may or may not have been Antoinette's (who cares?). Like a Norman Mailer novelistic examination of a historical figure, be it Jesus Christ, Gary Gilmore, or Marilyn Monroe, what's important isn't the subject, it's the author.

I bring this up in relation to Siegel's Alcatraz picture because, like young Coppola, it's his sensibilities inside of the material that makes the difference. And since Siegel shot at the real Alcatraz, they have one of the most impressive sets ever built (again, like Coppola with Versailles). Also the costume design seems wildly original. I've seen a few movies set in Alcatraz but I've never seen those blue pea coats the prisoners wear in the yard before. Is it true, who cares? It makes sense (same with the fresh fish naked walk) and it looks cool.

The story concerns the, supposedly, true story of armed robber and prison escape artist Frank Morris' arrival to Alcatraz in the early sixties. Almost everything about the movie seems a throwback to another time (it was the film's old school quality

that made me reject it at the time). The dry fifties-like staccato pull of the picture. The way Eastwood seemed not like his normal self but like a fifties tough guy actor (this is who he should have been when he played Thunderbolt. The Cimino movie is wonderful but it's attempt to hip up Eastwood always rubbed me the wrong way). Yet in trying to think of an appropriate fifties equivalent, I couldn't. The most hard-boiled badasses of that Eisenhower era, like Ralph Meeker and Charles Bronson, and laconic tough guys like Robert Mitchum, Brian Keith, and John Garfield all talked a blue streak. Among those fifties tough guys, only Alan Ladd knew how to keep his mouth shut.

But the diminutive Ladd could never compare as a camera subject with the massive Rodin-chiseled Eastwood (few actors wore forties and fifties suit fashions as well as Ladd. But the minute you took him out of the suit coats he'd so stylishly swim in, and put him in either regular clothes or western garb, he'd disappear). But where the throwback quality is most profoundly felt is on the very genre of prison films itself. Starting with Harvey Hart's (underrated director) very filmic adaptation of John Hubert's play Fortune and Men's Eyes, starring Wendell (The Sterile Cuckoo) Burton and Zooey (I Dismember Mama) Hall in 1971, the subject of male domination by homosexual rape was introduced into the genre. The subject was timidly touched on again in the TV movie Truman Capote's The Glass House. But the true reality of the racial implications of prison rage rape against the machine wasn't dealt with forthrightly until ex-convict Miguel Pinero's play and later movie adaptation Short Eyes changed the prison film genre forever – the Robert Young-directed film was also re-released as an exploitation film, retitled Slammer (which I saw at my favorite black cinema at the time, the Carson Twin Cinema, on a double bill with Richard Pryor's Which Way is Up?). And this reality at the time was compounded by the landmark television docu-special Scared Straight. From that day forward, not only any story about prison had to deal with it, any thoughts you might think about prison had to deal with it.

The only reason Jamaa Fanaka's shoddy prison pic Penitentiary, made the same year as the Siegel film, was a surprise hit was the bustin' the new bronc cell fight, an exciting and compelling new addition to the genre. Escape From Alcatraz represents – at the height of this awareness – the last time a convincing prison story could be told that didn't dwell on those aspects. And even this film couldn't completely ignore it. The film's most unconvincing scene is a ludicrous attempt by some barrel-built prick to bust Morris in the shower. In my day I've read a few books about The Rock. And while homosexual relationships did exist, they were looked on with disgust by the old-school hard timers (Machine Gun Kelly and his ilk). So instead of the sexually violent and racially motivated survival of the fittest

warped society of subjugated felons, Siegel's picture, maybe for the last time (without being a thirties period piece), could dwell on old school prison genre concerns. In the first half, the brutal isolation, monotonous regimented routines, numbered privileges, and that character that had all but disappeared, the cruel sadistic warden (except for women in prison films).

In the second half, the film deals with something that has been all but ignored by the genre, a masterly crafted, minutiae filled escape plan. It's the minutiae aspect of the breakout that's so compelling. Most movie prison breaks are exciting high flying affairs, milked for every second of nail-biting suspense. Oliver Reed's and Ian McShane's prison escape at the beginning of British action maestro's Douglas Hickox's crime film Sitting Target is a perfect example.

But Morris' constant chipping away at The Rock with a pair of nail clippers at first seems futile, then impressive, then finally heroic. Almost everything about the escape strikes you as unique. Morris' first revelation that maybe he's found a way off The Rock isn't presented the way we've become accustomed to. We don't see Morris moseying along the corridor, suddenly spotting a flaw in the stone fortress that only he can recognize. Morris doesn't have one big eureka idea. One small tiny reveal reveals another minutia of opportunity. All the step-by-step details of the escape become intriguing, and by the time you've put together a clear picture of the plan, you're fascinated. The constant chipping away of The Rock, the collecting of the clothes for their moonlight swim (the faultiest part of the plan, and what surely killed them in real life), the paper mache heads they painstakingly paint and sculpt (the image Siegel uses for the closing credits), the jury-rigged welding gun they build to cut the cell bars.

The plan takes such talent and intelligence that if they hadn't died, you can't help but think it could have won them parole. On the same token, all the same qualities involved in the escape attempt, discipline, skill, intelligence, talent, daring, could equally apply to Siegel's technique in depicting the escape. In the same way that Morris chips away at The Rock, Siegel chips away at Tuggle's senerio. As simpatico as Siegel and Eastwood were as artists, were as simpatico as Siegel and Morris are in methodology. Morris uses lifelong learned methods of ingenuity, practicality, and experience to dig through that rock wall. Siegel takes lifelong learned lessons of ingenuity, practicality, experience, and skill and applies them to his use of montage. Siegel is almost as silent as Morris, preferring to illustrate via montage than explain through expositional dialogue.

After beginning his career in the film business creating montages for other director's movies (Casablanca & The Roaring Twenties, among many others), the first really significant montage he ever used in his own work belongs to this late-in-life masterwork. The attention deficit disorder and rapid eye movement stimulation of most of today's AVID editing is a world away from the steady-handed storytelling of this MOVIOLA master.

Did they escape? I'm sure they were dead ducks nineteen minutes after they hit the water. But the real true life escape is that Siegel escaped letting his pal Eastwood down. By 1982, the fifteen year long era of New Hollywood would be over. And in this new era, with two misguided comedic star vehicles (Rough Cut with Burt Reynolds & Jinxed with Bette Midler), came the end of Don Siegel's five decades long career. These whimpers of a once proud lion have been almost completely forgotten. What's remembered, and can never be forgotten, is the artistic collaboration of two men who owed each other more than that could ever repay. With Siegel, Eastwood escaped flash in the pan status. With Eastwood, Siegel escaped anonymity, becoming a major A-list Hollywood director fairly late in life. And when these two old compadres, with a friendship based on mutual respect, admiration, masculinity, and love did the impossible, escaped from Alcatraz, they slammed the iron door behind them.

Don Siegel is no longer with us.
Eastwood flies solo now.

And Hollywood will never see their like again.

Players (1979)

After the success of “The Longest Yard” and “Rocky”, in the seventies, almost every sport got a Hollywood movie made about it. Basketball – “Fastbreak”, “One On One” and “The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh”, hockey – “Slap Shot”, marathon running – “Running”, bowling – “Dreamer”, pinball – “Tilt”, skateboarding – “Skateboard”. Well Anthony Harvey’s “Players” is *the* Hollywood tennis movie.

It’s the story of a tennis bum/hustler Chris (Dean Paul Martin) who meets the lonely wife (Ali MacGraw) of a tycoon Maxamilian Schell , who inspires him (sort of) to become a real tennis pro (though why she’s lonely isn’t clear since her tycoon husband seems devoted to her). Harvey’s film was ridiculed by critics and dismissed by audiences when it came out back in 1979.

But as a Hollywood tennis sports movie it’s pretty good. The movie starts with a terrific sequence of two players waiting for three minutes in the waiting room where players cool their heels before their match at Wimbledon. It’s a great opening scene for a sports movie. And Arnold Schulman’s script has a neat idea of structuring the whole film around Chris’ championship Wimbledon match. We watch the different sets of the match as real life tennis pros of the era (Connors & McEnroe) sit in the stands. In between the sets, we see flashbacks that tell us how Chris got there.

Dean Martin’s son Dean Paul Martin, in his only feature film lead, is pretty good as the tennis bum turned tennis star. His tennis is terrific, and while I didn’t necessarily need to see him star in anything else, as a tennis pro he’s pretty fucking convincing (he looks far more like a Van Patten then a Martin).

The glitzy ritzy jet-setting love story between him and MacGraw isn’t very believable, and by the end doesn’t make much sense. In fact the whole third act of the love story seems left on the cutting room floor, with the filmmakers hopeful audiences wouldn’t notice. Yet even while the love story collapses by the end, in its own “Greek Tycoon”-like soap opera opulence, it’s still kind of fun. But the film's best moments are Dean Paul Martin training with his coach, real life tennis giant Poncho Gonzales (playing himself), including a must in a sports movie, a great training montage.

SPECIAL NOTE: Dean Paul Martin (who is now deceased) back when he was fifteen was a pop star as one member of the 60's teeny bopper trio "Dino, Desi & Billy", who's most memorable hit was the catchy "I'm a fool".

Nightwing (1979)

The New Beverly has a real fun horror film triple feature at the end of the January calendar. An ecology horror / Native American mystic / Animals Attack triple feature from the late seventies and all three directed by studio stalwarts not known for directing horror. Michael ("The Quiller Memorandum") Anderson's "Orca", John ("Birdman Of Alcatraz") Frankenheimer's "Prophecy" and Arthur ("Love Story") Hiller's "Nightwing". "Orca" came out in 1977, and both "Nightwing" & "Prophecy" came out in 1979, and I saw all three during their original theatrical release ("Prophecy" I saw on a special Friday night sneak preview at the Mann's Old Town Mall Cinema. Remember those?).

Suffice to say none of the three work all the way through. In all cases the climax reduces the movies to a state of ridiculousness. In the case of "Orca" & "Nightwing" unfortunately so, because until they fly off the rails at the climax, they're both pretty effective Animal Attack thrillers.

However when the self serious "Prophecy" starts going ape shit crazy (or bear shit), is when it starts getting enjoyable. Of the three "Orca's" the best. Though you could make a case that "Nightwing" is the classiest and you wouldn't be wrong. And you could make the case that due to its bonkers bear monster alone "Prophecy" is easily the most fun, and you wouldn't be wrong there either. Now while I dig the bear monster in "Prophecy" and Carlo Rambaldi's Vampire Bats in "Nightwing", I love the whale in "Orca." All three films share symbolic connections of theme and genre and archetypes, so while I write about "Nightwing" I'll refer to "Orca" and "Prophecy" in connection with "Nightwing."

"Nightwing" is based on Martin Cruz Smith's best selling horror novel of the same name. But the movie presents a very simplified version of the same story. Everything about this Columbia Pictures Production suggests a big studio high ticket horror film entry. From its choice of Arthur Hiller as its director (this film followed up two of his biggest hits, "Silver Streak" & "The In-Laws"), Henry Mancini's out of character score (far more moodier than Mancini is known for), Charles ("Pretty Maids All In A Row") Rosher's cinematography, and its heavyweight line-up of screenwriters, Martin Cruz Smith himself, Steve ("Save The Tiger" & "Hustle") Shagan, and cult Texas cut-up Bud Shrake ("Kid Blue", "Songwriter" & "J.W. Coop"). As well as a nice mix of appealing young picture leads, Nick Mancuso & Kathryn Harrold, and scenery chewing veterans like David Warner & Strother Martin, all giving their all.

A sinister (but not necessarily evil) Indian priest named Abner has alienated himself from the people of his tribe The Maski. Abner is played very well by Chief George Clutesi the only real Native American actor among the pictures main characters (Cultesi functions as a similar authentic presence in “Prophecy”, except in that film , as opposed to being presented as a dark priest that inspires fear, he’s presented as the village idiot). Both the tribal elders and the other Maski priests fear Abner’s great power. They believe Abner has the power to communicate with Ya-Wa. Ya-Wa is described by Strother Martin in the movie as “The Maski God, and a monster that guards the gate of life and death.” Abner lives in the desert, in isolation, away from the others of his tribe. Inside the tribe he has only one friend, The Chief of the Maski Tribal Police, Deputy Duran (Nick Mancuso), who was raised by Abner. Deputy Duran (and yes I call him Deputy Duran Duran) knows Abner is a great man, and a powerful priest, but also a hateful hearted old bastard. While visiting his surrogate father, the old man informs the young man, “I’m sorry boy, they all gotta’ die.”

“Who’s gotta’ die, Abner,” asks Duran?

“Everybody,” Abner answers, “I must end the world.”

Abner intends to put an ancient curse on the territory. Then sacrifice himself to Ya-Wa, so the Maski God will bring forth its mercenaries, and destroy all who occupy their land. Pretty soon livestock is found slaughtered in ways that doesn’t bear the marks of any known indigenous animal. And then Duran finds Abner dead.

It’s not until David Warner shows up as a practically deranged doctor named Phillip Payne that the Native Americans learn that it might be vampire bats. Warner’s Dr. Payne has dedicated his entire life on a biblical like quest to exterminate vampire bats wherever they live and breed. He’s just wiped out thousands in Mexico, and has tracked the remaining survivors (all thirty thousand of them) to Arizona and one of the many caves inside the mountain range The Maski tribe consider their holy ground. From this point on the film becomes a pretty good high budget vampire bats attack flick. With Mancuso & Warner, & Kathryn Harrold as Duran’s love interest (a white doctor who devotes her time to the poverty stricken Maski people), trying to locate the cave where the bats are and destroy them.

The movie sizzles for most of its length due to Hiller’s camera moves, Charles Rosher’s modern day western photography, and Nick Mancuso’s legitimate

smoldering sex appeal as the film's tribal cop lead. And Carlo Rambaldi's bats are great! As are his bat attacks! The greatest bats on strings in the history of cinema! And Hiller does a good job depicting the poverty stricken Maski reservation. A community run by its tribal elders and priests, and the tribal cop is the only Native American authority with a foot in the modern world to represent the reservation residents.

Then there's another place where "Nightwing" initially shines, the often ridiculous explanation in an animal attack film, of why exactly are the animals attacking? It's usually a by-product of industrial pollution (like in "Prophecy"), or industrial science run amuck (like "Piranha" & "Alligator"). But refreshingly the movie (for a while) takes Abner's supernatural powers seriously.

"Nightwing," rather than offer an explanation, poses a question. Are the vampire bats a product of an unnatural migration of a species foreign to the territory, like David Warner's unbalanced Dr. Phillip Payne claims? Or are the vampire bats Abner's prophecy and curse come to fruition? Is this the wrath of Ya-Wa and the bats are his mercenaries? Mancuso's doctor girlfriend Harrold survives a bat attack about mid movie, and when she relates her experience to him she describes it as, "the end of the world," just as Abner foretold it, "I'm sorry boy, I've gotta' end the world." And this question section of the movie is the best part. But naturally it asks an interesting question only to come to an uninteresting conclusion.

Movies of this time had no problem laying all the blame on Satan, or that Catholic Priests had an inside track when it came to dealing with the Devil compared to all other religions. But taking the Native American priest and religion serious enough to be the ultimate culprit… that would be silly. Now naturally that's what I expect from a late seventies ecology horror/Native American mystic/Animals Attack film.

But something about "Nightwing" it bugs me more.

Partly because you feel the movie wants it to be Abner's curse.

It just doesn't have the balls to commit to it.

But aside from the natural fun and terror of animals attacking, one of the most defining characteristics of the Animal Attack Genre, and one of its most enjoyable are the archetypes who appear and reappear in film after film.

First the male lead, who is (usually) completely ignorant about the animal in question, but due to circumstances is the one tasked to deal with the animal or animals or fish or fishes or bugs or worms or frogs. It's (almost) always a person in some position of authority in the community under siege. Either someone in the medical profession, Robert Foxworth in "Prophecy", William Shatner's Veterinarian in "Kingdom of the Spiders". But more often then not, the hero in this genre is a law enforcement officer of some type. Naturally Roy Scheider's Sheriff Brody in "Jaws," Robert Forster, James Garner, and Albert Finneys' Police Detectives in "Alligator," "They Only Kill Their Masters," and "Wolfen," Christopher George and John Jarratts' Park Rangers in "Grizzly" & "Dark Age," and Timothy Bottoms' Park Supervisor in "In the Shadow of Kilimanjaro." And Nick Mancusos' tribal cop Deputy Duran (Duran) is a fine addition to this subgenre trope, until the movie and especially Hiller sabotage him.

Once our heroes (Mancuso, Warner, & Harrold) locate the bat cave (sic), that's when the whole damn script falls apart. But the director's biggest sin is allowing his lead actor to look so foolish. After Hiller does a terrific job of setting up Nick Mancuso as dynamic leading man for three quarters of the film, he directs him to over-emote in the film's big climax to such a degree that he just looks silly. And it's really a damn shame because before that Mancuso really fills the screen and carries the film like a proper leading man (part of being a leading man is leading the story, leading the other actors, and leading the picture). But at the end it's as if the whole movie conspires to sabotage his performance.

The other archetype that's well known to lovers of the Animals Attack subgenre is the Animal Expert who (usually) loves the animal or animals, or is at least fascinated by them. This character understands the creatures, and has spent their lives either studying them or training them, and then spends the movie explaining them to the ignorant cop hero. This animal expert character is more often than not played by a beautiful woman. Charlotte Rampling in "Orca," Tiffany Bolling in "Kingdom of the Spiders," Robin Riker in "Alligator," Kate McNeil in "Monkey Shines," Katharine Ross in "They Only Kill Their Masters." But sometimes these characters are male, Richard Dreyfuss' Matt Hooper in "Jaws," Richard Jackle in "Grizzly," George C. Scott in "Day of the Dolphin," and Tom Noonan in "Wolfen" (this is the character that's most likely to tell you the name of the animal in Latin within their first or second scene).

Then there's that character's opposite number. The Hunter. The Exterminator. This character hates the animal in question, usually due to a personal experience, and is oftentimes presented as unstable, and as dangerous and scary as the amuck running

animals themselves. Robert Shaws' Quint in "Jaws," Vic Morrows' Quint clone in "The Great White," Michael Douglas in "The Ghost and the Darkness," Richard Harris in "Orca" (Harris doesn't start off that way, but after the whale kills Keenan Wynn and bites off Bo Derek's leg, he gets there). In "Alligator," Henry Silva is presented as comic version of this character. And the only interesting thematic element between "Jaws" and "Jaws 2" is Roy Scheiders' Sheriff Brody metamorphosing from the first archetype in the first movie, to the third in the second.

In Sam Fuller's tough tale "White Dog," Paul Winfield represents a complex combination of the second and third archetype. Winfield plays a black dog trainer who's had past experiences with white dogs (dogs that have been trained to attack black folks). Winfield knows the dog itself is not to blame, it's the vicious racist who trained him. But regardless of how the monster was built, it's still a monster and too dangerous to live. Yet the trainer's understanding of canine instinct compels him to try and remove the hate that has been instilled in the dog. More to prove to himself that hate can be surgically removed, than to save this particular dog. He's tried to break three other white dogs in the past, and all three attempts ended in failure. And if he can't break the dog, he'll kill him.

In "Nightwing," David Warner's obsessed bat exterminator isn't as complex as Paul Winfield, but he is a combination of the second and third archetype, and he is a lot fun. It appears Warner's character Dr. Phillip Payne, who's spent his life traveling the globe chasing down and destroying vampire bats, has been driven bat shit crazy in the process. He seems just as single-minded and bloodthirsty as the bats, and as unhinged as Richard Harris' fishing boat captain in "Orca" (both Harris and Warner could of switched roles). But he's not just a skilled hunter, he's an expert on bats, with a degree and a grant from The World Heath Organization that funds his life's work. Yet he seems every bit as possessed as the Indian Shaman Abner when he speaks of them. At one point Warner challenges Mancuso with the question, "You can't seriously believe the bats are a direct result of Abner's curse, do you? "

Yet we have listened to Warner recite purple prose speech after speech that the bats are not just a species of animal, but evil on earth incarnate. So exactly who is the superstitious fool? Warner is hammy as all hell, but Warner's British hammy presence comes across as an honorable approach to the material. It's less of a choice on Warner's part then it is full commitment to the character as written. Unfortunately, like Mancuso, Hiller and the script betray Warner's character.

After spending three quarters of an hour setting up Warner's Dr. Payne as the Big Kahuna of bat killers, he proves to be completely ineffectual during the film's climax in the bat cave (sic). But like I said, the whole movie goes to hell once they locate the bat cave. The film also gives us mixed signals about Dr. Anne Dillon, Kathryn Harrold's character. The script starts out like it wants her to be more than a love interest. But even though she's shown to be resourceful (she alone survives a bat attack that leaves her and a four man party stranded in the desert), she's a love interest to be saved in the film's last third. Even though she participates in the big climatic move against the bats at the end, she helps Mancuso put a bunch of black rocks in a circle.

It would be tempting to declare David Warner Movie MVP, but I'm afraid that title goes to Strother Martin trading post store keeper Selwyn. Martin only has two scenes, and absolutely nothing to do with the bat plot. But his monologue in the trading post with the born again christians (who when the bats attack are shown to be savage hypocrites) about his forty years living amongst the "Indians" gives Carlo Rambaldi's bats a run for their money as the best thing in the picture. Martin plays a former Mormon missionary who after a lifetime spent among the Native Americans he shares an understanding with them. He hates them, and they hate him.

This is the movie Hiller and screenwriter Bud Shrake would make if they weren't forced to fuck around with these bats. Watching Strother Martin's scenes I started missing him, even though he's been dead forty years. In the seventies if you went to the movies all the time you could expect to see Strother Martin four or five times a year. And I'm not talking about big showy roles like "Cool Hand Luke", or "The Wild Bunch", or "Hard Times." But in roles and movies like this one – in an' out. And he was always great, and he always made you smile, and he always left you wanting more. And when he died he left a hole in American Cinema that nobody else can ever replace.

Maybe one of the reasons American Cinema in the seventies was so great is because we could expect to see Strother Martin four times a year.

The Lady in Red (1979)

The John Sayles-scripted, Julie Corman-produced, Lewis Teague-directed 1978 gangster opus "Lady in Red" (aka "Touch Me and Die") is my candidate for most ambitious film ever made at Roger Corman's New World Pictures. Not only do I think this thirties era epic about Polly Franklin (Pamela Sue Martin) the fictional brothel Prostitute who inadvertently leads John Dillinger to his death in front of the Biograph Theatre is Sayles best screenplay, I also think it's the best script ever written for an exploitation movie.

Which on one hand sounds like a grandiose claim to make, but on the other hand…is it?

Exploitation movies have a rogues' gallery of classics, and near classics, and even anti-classics, as well as many instances of directorial tour-de-force. Usually performed on a budgetary shoestring, that only makes their achievement more triumphant. However the scripts themselves are rarely the strongest element of exploitation movie classics. There are some stand out examples. The be-bop pizzazz of Charles B. Griffith's screenplays for Roger Corman (especially the early ones). Of course everyone would cite "Little Shop of Horrors" and "Bucket of Blood", but I equally love "Rock All Night."

R. Wright Campbell's script for Corman's "Machine Gun Kelly," the best script Corman ever shot, including those written by Richard Matheson and Robert Towne. And on the same American-International Pictures double bill as "Machine Gun Kelly" was Stan Shpetner's lively script for William Witney's "The Bonnie Parker Story." Which not only predates Benton and Newman's "Bonnie and Clyde," it predates David Lynch's "Wild At Heart" as well (including flame dissolves). It's the dialogue in Shpetner's script that really sings, and places alongside other grindhouse dialogue classics like Jackie Moran's script for Russ Meyers "Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!" and Mel Wells beatnik slang dialogue polish in Jack Arnold's "High School Confidential."

Shpetner, who spent most of his career as a producer, only wrote three produced screenplays, but his second one for William Witney is a doozy as well. The 1958 World War II action adventure "Paratroop Command." It's the best of American-International Pictures World War II potboilers. (Burt Topper's "Hell Squad" is pretty good too), but I think it's a little more than that. It contains a realism that sets it apart from most World War II movies of the fifties (Sam Fuller's films aside). To compare it to "Platoon" might be going a bit too far, but only a bit.

Because director Witney spent as much time in World War II as Oliver Stone did in Vietnam, and not making movies with the Mark Harris bunch. Fighting the war. But what "Paratroop Command" completely predates is the early sixties beloved classic World War II TV show "Combat." Even to the point of starring Combat's "Kirby" Jack Hogan, a William Witney regular ("Paratroop Command", "The Bonnie Parker Story", and "The Cat Burglar").

And, yes, in standout B-movie scripts, I suppose you could include Eddie and Mildred Dein's Eugene O'Neill play by way of a 50's commie espionage thriller, "Shack Out On 101." The first two scripts of Romero's Living Dead trilogy. Bobby Poole's uncredited Scarface remake "The Mack" (instead of Italian gangsters in Chicago battling over bootleg beer, it's black pimps in Oakland fighting over pussy and power). The brutal simplicity of John Carpenter and Debra Hill's original "Halloween" screenplay. The fact that Carpenter and Hill turned Michael Myers "The Shape" into Laurie Strode's (Jamie Lee Curtis) brother in the first sequel was an awful idea, and ruins one part of the great premise of the first film. The seemingly randomness of Michael Myers selection of Laurie as the object of his…affection? Also the stupid brother angle casts all the other "Halloween" sequels as fruit from a poison tree, including Dwight Little's superior "Halloween 4" and Steve Miner's superlative "Halloween H2O."

And before I get to "The Lady In Red", there's John Sayles' two witty riffs on Spielberg's "Jaws," Joe Dante's "Piranha" and Lewis Teague's "Alligator."

"Piranha" for its cleverness, and the true gonzo gruesomeness of its bloody climax at a summer camp for small children. The movie seems to relish the idea of putting chubby legged and armed little tikes in the pathway of vicious razor-sharp teethed little fish. In the bloody inner tube floating free-for-all climax, we see many a child chewed alive one razor-sharp bite at a time. Including one unfortunate little girl who seemingly gets her crotch burrowed into by one aggressive piranha with an agenda all its own.

Also at the climax "Piranha" has a suspense beat worthy of the Spielberg original. Bradford Dillman, who's quite good in a rare lead, usually around this time he made a living yelling at Dirty Harry, or playing priggish two star generals ("Meteor"), or priggish gold mining executives ("Gold"). However in "Piranha," in his sexy beard and woodsy flannel shirt, Dillman comes across as a pretty virile leading man. And with his over enunciated way of gritting out his lines through clenched teeth he strikes a B-movie Charlton Heston pose (a pose that looks good on him). Dillman, the film's hero, has to turn the wheel to a valve that closes the

waterway from the dam to the ocean (the super Piranha can live in both fresh water and saltwater, so if they get to the ocean…that's it). Only the dam has flooded and the wheel for the valve is located under water. So Brad must go diving in his red flannel shirt, find the valve, turn the wheel, all as the little killer fish descend on him attacking his flesh. Very exciting.

I'm sure Sayles original script was pretty witty, but smart aleck filmmaker Joe Dante was always more comfortable when he could engage in Mad Magazine style satiric humor. And by the end of "Piranha" it feels both like a satire on Jaws rip-offs, and an exciting bloody Jaws rip-off in its own right. And Sayles script for Lewis Teague's "Alligator" is even better. I will always be indebted to "Alligator" because it's due to that film that I chose Robert Forster to play Max Cherry in my film "Jackie Brown."

Now some have theorized Pam Grier's character Jackie Brown is actually her character in "Coffy" and "Foxy Brown" only older and wiser and in a dead end job, beaten down by a hard life. Normally I like this type of thinking. And I understand the temptation. But I saw it more as a continuation of the actress' persona than the actual characters from the earlier movies. Besides, does anybody really think the young Jackie Brown was blowing off drug dealers heads with a sawed off shotgun, leading black revolutionaries, and cutting off Peter Brown's penis?

On the other hand, the Sayles-scripted, Forster-portrayed cop who battles the giant Alligator in the movie of the same name could very well be the same man who became a bail bondsman and opened up a bail bonds office in Carson, California, seventeen years later. All the way down to the jokes they make about Forster's thinning hair in the first movie, to his visible hair plugs in the second ("When I look in the mirror, it looks like me").

But all these examples seem fully realized by their directors and their performers. But then again these filmmakers Roger Corman, William Witney, Russ Meyer, Jack Arnold, George A. Romero, Joe Dante, and John Carpenter are some of the most innovative directors of this type of cinema that ever lived. But "The Lady in Red" is a somewhat different story. And that's not a slight on the film that Lewis Teague directed, or Julie Corman produced, or Pamela Sue Martin's performance (she's sensational).

The movie itself is tremendously entertaining. It holds up beautifully to repeated viewings (I've completely lost count how many times I've seen it since I saw it at

The Rolling Hills Twin Cinema the week of its initial Los Angeles engagement). Nevertheless, John Sayles wrote a big screen big budget gangster epic, with one of the best female characters of any movie of the second half of the seventies. And while Teague and Corman pull it off, they do it by hanging on for dear life. Sayles' script deserved a much bigger canvas, a much, much bigger budget, and a much, much, much longer shooting schedule. With all the limitations imposed on them, Teague's film is a miracle.

But making a classic out of this material shouldn't have required a miracle. Just talent and time. Teague and the cast provided the former, but New World Pictures could only provide so much of the latter. Sayles script is much better then the one Sergio Leone shot for his period gangster epic "Once Upon A Time In America". I've always imagined a world where Robert De Niro plays Robert Conrad's John Dillinger, and Harvey Keitel plays Robert Forster's Turk. If it sounds like I'm advocating for a big time director to stage a proper production of Sayles' script, I am. David O. Russell and Jennifer Lawrence, I'm talking to you.

There really is no female-led feature film set in the thirties quite like "The Lady in Red." Or better said, it's like five thirties set female-led features rolled into one huge Russian novel of a movie (shot on a shoestring in four weeks). The journey that our heroine, Polly Franklin, takes from humble beginning to blood-soaked end manages to cover every different female archetype of the depression. Farmer's (abused) daughter, deflowered innocent, sweatshop worker, taxi dancer, prison inmate, brothel prostitute, greasy spoon waitress, romantic lover (of John Dillinger no less), all leading to her last position, ringleader of a bank robbery gang. As Polly hops from position and circumstance, she also illustrates just how out of reach the American dream was for a poor working girl in the big city.

But this isn't just a Chicago-set tale of female subjugation like Japan's "The Life of Oharu." Polly's journey is sporadically littered with small triumphs and impressive demonstrations of strength. She may spend most of the film behind the eight ball, yet she never gives in to victimization. Polly has a plethora of tormentors throughout the picture. Tiny Alice (the cruel women's prison matron, who introduces herself to the fresh fish with the line; "I'm Tiny Alice, and from now on I rate top billing in all of your nightmares"), Frognose (the even crueler Chicago gangland leader), the weasel newspaper reporter played by Bobby Hogan who, like a heroine in a Thomas Hardy novel, sets poor Polly on her path of degradation in the first place, and the maggot sweat shop foreman played to one-note perfection by a perfectly loathsome Dick Miller. And Pamela Sue Martin's Polly eventually stands up to and triumphs over all of them.

Sayles not only takes Polly through every archetype of women's roles of the thirties, like I did with The Bride in the Kill Bill movies, he takes her through almost every thirties film genre. Working girl in the big city story, story of a prostitute, female convict in a prison picture, love story, and finally gangster picture.

The story starts when Polly, the young daughter of a farmer, goes to town and accidentally finds herself the hostage in a thirties bank robbery (with a terrific Mary Woronov as the Bonnie Parker-like bank robber). She's interviewed and exploited by the newspaper press (scumbag Bobby Hogan). And after one beating too many by her religious fanatic father, she runs away hitching a ride to the big city, Chicago. At which point Sayles has her go from one oppressive environment to the next. Sweatshop worker, then taxi dancer, where she's busted for prostitution and sent to prison and put under the thumb of women in prison matron from hell, Tiny Alice, played like a villainous ham sandwich by Nancy Parsons (she was Bulliela Balbricker in Bob Clark's "Porky's"). Parsons in this, "Porky's," and her role as part of Farmer Vincent's brother-sister act in "Motel Hell" was both hideous and strangely sexy. She didn't just play battle-axes. There was a sensual femininity underneath her ogres. When Polly's released from the joint, through plot circumstances she's forced to join the whorehouse of Hungarian immigrant Anna Sage (Louise Fletcher), Chicago's biggest madam. After the whirlwind of degradation we've witnessed up till now, Anna's whorehouse seems like a spiritual retreat. Polly at last finds a family (watch for a great cameo by Robert Forster).

Sayles once said when he wrote "The Lady In Red" he imagined it as a fast talking Raoul Walsh/James Cagney type gangster picture. Only the director shot it more like a Louis Malle film. That's a reference to Malle's thirties-set brothel drama "Pretty Baby" with Brooke Shields. And the whole brothel section does seem a bit like "Pretty Baby Part 2." Which considering the resources at Teague's disposal is pretty impressive, baby.

As I've already hinted at an epic novel worth of events happens in the course of the story to Polly. Ultimately leading to Polly spearheading a bank robbery against the mob backed bank controlled by the film's big villain Frognose, Chicago's most sadistic mobster (played like a snarling Doberman by a terrifying Christopher Lloyd). John Dillinger (this time played by TV superstar diminutive tough guy Robert Conrad) doesn't enter the story until about midway (the very good Conrad, along with Martin Sheen, is the only actor to play both Dillinger & Pretty Boy Floyd). While John Sayles' material deserved both a bigger canvas and a bigger

production, Polly got the interpreter she deserved in Pamela Sue Martin. “The Lady In Red” is a low budget classic of its era, and in a large part that’s due to Martin’s dynamic lead performance. With all Polly goes through she’s never less than human. Even when the life of a thirties brothel prostitute turns her from a naive young girl to a big city tough cookie, her heart never hardens. She takes a Leo Gorcey-Dead End Kid-type street kid off the street and gets him a job at Anna’s (played very well by Coppola regular Glenn Withrow).

She looks after her Jewish communist cellmate from prison even after she leaves jail. And during her time at the horrible sewing factory, like a sweat shop Spartacus she leads the other women in a revolt against the bullying foreman, Dick Miller. “Oh, you’re a real big man, bullying a bunch of hungry women,” she tells him in front of the eyes of the other hungry women. And when she finally finds love in the arms of Dillinger, it’s like her heart is granted, if not freedom, at least parole. And so is the heart of the audience as well. It’s one of the things so successful about the movie. We feel every single emotion Polly feels. We go on this epic journey with Polly. That’s why when the film reaches her hard-fought final freeze frame we’re all exhausted. The game may be rigged against her throughout the whole movie. But Polly always plays to win anyway. And in her own way, in that final freeze frame, she does. She’s paid the cost to be the boss.

Both the cops and the mob will be on her trail. And tomorrow is just another hard day.

But she’s got the loot, she’s got the nerve, and she’s still alive.

The game continues…and she’s still in it to win it.

Prophecy (1979)

John Frankenheimer's *Prophecy* is pretty much a piece of shit from the word go, but the more it goes, the more enjoyable this piece of shit gets, till it can officially be classified under that beloved category, *enjoyable piece of shit.*

Now-a-days *Prophecy* is thought of as John Frankenheimer's ecological horror film fiasco with a goofy bear monster. But in 1979 when it was released, it wasn't thought of or advertised as *The New Frankenheimer Film.* But as screenwriter David Seltzer's follow up to his smash hit *The Omen.*

Richard Donner's film of Seltzer's screenplay was one of the biggest hits of its day. And while Donner did a good job (*it's easily his best directed movie)*, and Gregory Peck gave his all in a terrific late career lead performance, the reason the movie worked so well was due to Seltzer's script.

What most people who talk about *The Omen* now lose sight of, was forty-five years ago, when audiences first saw the movie during its original theatrical engagement, like Gregory Peck's character *Robert Thorn, we (*the audience) didn't know little *Damien* was the anti-Christ. We, along with Peck, pieced together that Information through the film's first two acts. What made the movie so compelling was Seltzer's storytelling, the mystery he laid out, and the mythology he created (*the three sixes on the body, the parentage with a jackal)*, and those amazing set pieces (*David Warner and the sheet of glass, the Rottweilers at the graveyard, Lee Remick's fall, the baboons).*

When the sequel came out *Damien: Omen Two,* it never had a chance to compete with the original. Because*,* unlike the first film, we already know *Damien* is the anti-Christ. We just stare at the screen waiting for William Holden to figure it out. So as opposed to the scary mystery that Seltzer orchestrated for us, the sequel just consists of people finding or figuring out *Damien* is the anti-Christ, and then they die in elaborate ways *(admittedly the elevator cable death of the black doctor was pretty fucking cool).*

But with *The Omen* Seltzer didn't just write a smash hit movie. He was also offered the chance to write the movie novelization based on his screenplay. He accepted and turned his script into a damn fine horror novel (*that includes a lot of differences from the film. Including changing the first name of Peck's character from Robert to Jeremy).*

Well Seltzer's novelization became a paperback sensation, turning into one of the best selling horror novels of all time. In the seventies when 7-Eleven store paperback spinner racks were filled with horror novels with lurid covers, there were four books that were always evoked. *Rosemary's Baby, The Exorcist, Salem's Lot, & The Other.*

Evoked as in written somewhere on the front or back cover, *Scarier than The Other. Not since Salem's Lot. It starts where Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist leaves off.* Well Seltzer's *The Omen* novelization sold as much as those genre defining hits. At this date over two million copies. *The Omen* was such a popular paperback and legit good book, that a lot of people just assumed the movie was based on the novel, and not the other way around. So David Seltzer was on the verge of becoming a horror writer superstar in both pictures and print. The newspaper ads for *Prophecy* didn't read, *From the man that brought you 99 and 44/100% Dead.* They read, *From the man that brought you The Omen.* Then both Seltzer's book for *Prophecy* and Frankenheimer's film came out, and that was the end of David Seltzer's major horror career.

In the letter pages of *Cinefantastique & Fangoria Magazine* all the fans complained about make-up artist Tom Burman's crazy bear monster. At the sneak preview I attended at *The Mann's Old Town Mall Theatre,* towards the end when the monster stands at the foot of the lake, back lit by a full moon, people in the audience said out loud, *It's just a bear!* Now it's a monstrous bear, with a face like a cheeseless pizza, *but still a bear.* In the supplementary section of the newly released Blu-ray of *Prophecy,* Seltzer swears the creature the Native American characters refer to as *Katahdin* was never supposed to be a bear.

That's horseshit.

I read the book. And while Seltzer never gives a *complete* description of *Katahdin,* what he does describe sounds a whole lot like a mountain bear. It's stronger than a bear (*it can rip a person in half with one strike of its…paw?)* At 20 feet tall it's bigger than a bear. And it has huge saucer-like eyes. But everything else is *exactly* like a bear. It's covered in fur. It has paws and it has a snout. It runs like a bear, it charges like a bear, it reacts like a bear. It reacts to its dead cub the way a bear would. Its cubs are like bear cubs if the fur on their face was ripped off. Besides, that it's a contaminated bear, is kind of the point of the story.

A forest in Maine is being poisoned by a paper mill factory that's pouring *mercury* in the rivers and streams (Seltzer based his idea on an incident that happened in

Japan). The poison is killing the fish that the local Native American fishermen live on. But the poisoned fish that the tribe eats are affecting them too. The tribal people are getting deathly sick, they're going mad, babies are being born dead or deformed. And not just the Native Americans. The animals in the forest that eat the fish, are going crazy and mutating. Trout become as big as dogs. A pollywog is as big as a baby seal (*which begs the question where are the giant frogs).* And raccoons become as vicious as wolverines. So it seems the whole point of the story is a bear who lives on contaminated fish has mutated into a monster and has had a couple of monster cubs.

But it's still a bear.

The interviews on the Blu-ray are hysterical, because everybody points fingers at everybody else. Seltzer claims it was never meant to be a bear. But Talia Shire constantly refers to the monster as a bear. Seltzer blames director Frankenheimer and make-up artist Tom Burman for turning his creature into a bear. Tom Burman blames Seltzer's original design of the creature as unworkable, so a bear creature was designed instead. Now could Burman have made a *better* bear monster? Yes. But Seltzer's script is so terrible, if Burman *had* made a better bear monster, it's doubtful that anyone would remember *Prophecy.* It's the *bonkers bear monster* that makes the movie memorable. All the horror movie elements, the characters, the dialogue, the pulp plotting are awful. But what really makes the script so obnoxious is how *serious* and *important* Seltzer *thinks* his ridiculous monster movie is. The writer feels he's making a grand ecological statement, and a stinging angry indictment on industrial pollution.

*Instead…*what he made is an unintentional comedy that the cast plays so seriously (especially male lead Robert Foxworth) that it plays like dead pan farce. In interviews on the Blu-ray, the two lead actors, Foxworth & Shire, speak about how good Seltzer's script was. Well after seeing the movie again that seems implausible (*But hey, ya' never know).* So I read Seltzer's book (*and remember, his novel version of The Omen was dynamite, and deserved all of its success).* Well the book's even worse. Because it's even more strident, more pompous, and more cocksure of its own self-importance. And none of it is relieved by the film's unintentional humor. Which to Frankenheimer's credit (*it's obvious he didn't give a shit about this movie)* finally catches up with the movie. Because the film's last twenty minutes, where our heroes are being chased by *Katahdin,* and they all fight it out together in the woods and the lake are a fucking gas! And sympathetic Talia Shire aside, I was totally rooting for the fucked up hamburger faced bear to wipe everybody out.

And Seltzer even fucks that up!

The only thing not fun about the crazy climax is the stupid way Seltzer and Frankenheimer have Foxworth defeat the monster.

Nevertheless, I kind of have a soft spot in my heart for this stupid ass movie. Aside from *the bonkers bear monster*, the film's one saving grace is Talia Shire. Nobody else in the film, not Foxworth, not Armand Assante, not Richard Dysart and not Chief George (*Nightwing) Clutesi* rises above the fray, except Shire. In the story Shire's character wants to have a baby, and her husband (Foxworth) is dead set against it for a lot of virtue signaling self-important reasons (*the world is too terrible a place to bring a child into, etc.etc.etc).*

Before the couple travel to Maine and all the *monster shit* starts happening, Shire realizes she's pregnant. But because he's such a pompous ass on the subject, she hesitates telling him. Is she waiting for the right time to spring the news? Is she building up the courage to tell him something she knows he doesn't want to hear? Or is she so dead set on not getting an abortion, she's waiting for enough time to pass till that's no longer an option? We never find out what Talia's plan was, because before long we learn about the mercury in the water creating mutations. We also learn the Native Americans and the forest animals are giving birth to mutated babies due to eating the mercury effected fish from the river.

The scene where Foxworth relates this to both Shire and the audience is really funny. Because as Foxworth blathers on, Shire starts realizing the implications of what her husband is saying (*we saw Shire eat some of the fish from the lake),* which is she could very likely be giving birth to mutated monster. Why *it's funny*, is while Shire never tells her husband about her inner anguish, it's obvious to *everybody in the audience*. Beyond obvious. Comically obvious. That is obvious to everybody *except* her oblivious husband Foxworth. Who's too busy giving a self possessed three page monologue about the sins of the paper mill to notice his wife is flipping the fuck out.

Yet one dumbass idea Seltzer comes up with works. As our band of heroes make their way through the forest, they come across the two baby cubs of the bonkers bear monster (they have the face of *The Incredible Melting Man)*. Foxworth insists on taking the monster cubs with them as undeniable proof of what the paper mill pollution has caused (*it's why the bonkers bear monster is chasing after them in the first place. She wants her cubs back).* Giving it to Shire to carry as they try and

escape the forest. Wrapped up in a swaddling blanket, clutching the crying beast to her chest, holding the frightened cub in her arms, Shire's maternal instincts begin to emerge. She realizes the mutated *thing* she's cradling in her arms, may well be a cousin to the mutated *thing* growing in her belly. And I'll be dammed if Shire doesn't make her motherly compassion for the infant monster touchingly poignant.

Almost everything about Talia Shire in the movie is poignant. In the film her character is a concert cellist. Watching her play the cello at the beginning of the film is poignant. Her desire to be a mother is poignant. Her position as wife to Foxworth's insufferable ass of a husband brings out our sympathy. And it's *her* tenderness towards the baby monster that moves us, not Tom Burman's laughable inept puppet. And the poignancy of Shire's contribution to *Prophecy* continues on the Blu-ray special features interview. She speaks lovingly of the *bonkers bear monster mother* searching for her cub. From the way she speaks it's obvious she *likes* the movie. And she seems genuinely surprised when the makers of the special features inform her that horror fans found the monster ridiculous. At the end of the interview she smiles a little sadly and says into camera, *we did our best, sorry if you didn't like our monster.* Again giving Seltzer's and Frankenheimer's misshapen monster movie the same compassion forty years later that she gave the baby monster on screen.

This monstrosity of a movie about a monstrosity that only a mother could love. It makes the smug bastards who made the Blu-ray extras look as insensitive as Foxworth in the movie. She sincerely liked the film and the monster (*that's why she was happy to come back years later and talk about it).*

They should of left her tenderness intact. Because Talia Shire's tenderness is the film's only sincere accomplishment.

The Seduction of Joe Tynan (1979)

Honeysuckle Rose (1980)

As a fan of New York filmmaker and photographer Jerry Schatzberg, I decided to finally see two of his films that until now had eluded me. Willie Nelson's first starring vehicle "Honeysuckle Rose," and Alan Alda's first feature film after his Hawkeye stardom, "The Seduction of Joe Tynan". Only to realize, more or less, they're both the same movie.

Both films are about public figures, in Willie Nelson's case country and western superstar Buck Bonham, and in Alda's case a liberal senator Joe Tynan. The story of both films is a public figure, who are both in loving marriages with wonderful wives, Dyan Cannon in "Honeysuckle Rose," and Barbara Harris in "Tynan."

In both films, the public figure goes out on the road, in Nelson's case literally on a concert tour, in Tynan's case figuratively on business trips looking for damning evidence to use against a possible Supreme Court Judge appointee. And in both films, they drift into an affair with a younger, sexy business associate, Amy Irving's background singer in the music movie, and Meryl Streep's political operative in the Beltway film.

In both films, the wife finds out about the relationship in a public setting. In "Honeysuckle Rose," Cannon watches backstage as Nelson & Irving share a passionate kiss on stage in front of an arena of fans. In "Tynan," Harris' wife figures it out while sitting on a dais in front of an audience during a dinner honoring her senator husband, by witnessing her husband's body language when he interacts with Streep. Both wives confront their partners; in "Tynan," being a proper political wife, that night in the privacy of their bedroom. In "Honeysuckle Rose," being the badass cowboy hat wearing Texas babe Cannon is, right that minute on stage in front of the whole arena crowd (in one of the film's best scenes). In both films, the wives give the hubby the heave-ho, thus ruining the affair with the younger piece of strange.

And both films end (literally the last scene of both films) with the public figure (Joe & Buck) on stage, in front of his adoring fans, beseeching a silent sign of forgiveness from their scorned partner.

As similar as their stories are, what I find the most interestingly insightful about comparing the two is seeing where they're different. "Tynan," which was written by Alda himself, was the better script. Yet "Honeysuckle Rose" is the better movie, and especially the better Schatzberg movie. The opening scene of the country & western opus is Willie Nelson hitting golf balls on the side of the road at dawn, while his bandmates in the tour bus sleep. This opening sequence immediately lures you into Schatzberg's photographic gaze. While in "Tynan" (which looks a little drab by comparison), the most involving section is a B storyline of old, slightly demented senator Melvyn Douglass (terrific) trying to push through a racist Supreme Court candidate, and Tynan's opportunistic betrayal of the old colleague. The "Seduction" of the title doesn't refer to Streep & Alda's philandering, but Tynan's realization of his own opportunism. "Honeysuckle Rose" doesn't even have a B storyline.

Yet Tynan was written by a man (Alda) for himself to play. Where "Honeysuckle" was written by a woman Carol Sobieski (yes, there were many hands on this script, but it was originally Sobieski's script, and not written for Willie Nelson, but for Hoyt Axton). And the way the female and male writers deal with the infidelity is where the two films part company. The way most male-centric movies deal with a husband's infidelity is to bury excuses for their actions inside of dramatic scenes (Blake Edwards' "Micki & Maude" for example). Implying that the wife, wonderful as she is, is unknowingly pushing her husband in the arms of another woman. And the character of the other woman is usually younger, sexier, and professionally more impressive.

I mean how can he resist, he's only human?

And naturally, writer Alda starts stacking the chips against Barbara Harris' wife right from the start. Revealing to both him and the audience that she resents the life of a political wife and has a distaste for politics in general. She even implies that while she supported his campaigns, she never really thought he'd win. And now she resents the political life she's been forced to live, and that he's become a stranger to their children by always being in Washington. Where naturally the sexy Streep is a natural born political animal, who not only shares the same goals as the senator but speaks his language as well. Thus giving a logical and emotional basis for the attraction and eventual affair (I mean it's okay for a woman to not like football, but not if she's married to a football player).

On the other hand, "Honeysuckle Rose" is surprisingly free of these dramatic justifications. Dyan Cannon's wife is pushed with such power in the script she

could almost be its hero, and by the time she storms the stage, she is. She's presented from the beginning and to the end as the perfect woman for Nelson's superstar troubadour. And Irving is presented as who she is, a young sexy starstruck neophyte who seduces the older man into bed because she can. But in "Honeysuckle Rose" it's not even like she's particularly talented, or the two share a special chemistry on stage that bleeds into real life. On the contrary, earlier in the film Nelson and Cannon share a duet of Kris Kristofferson's "Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)" that brings down the house and illustrates the couple's bond (it's one of the best music scenes ever in a singing star's movie vehicle). As opposed to Alda, Sobieski not only does not let Nelson off the hook, she has multiple hooks.

Amy Irving's character isn't just some backup singer hired randomly to go on the road. She's the young daughter of Willie's old band mate (seemingly) best friend Slim Pickins (Irving doesn't look like she even knows Slim Pickins, forget about being his daughter). So the entire story doubles down on Buck's betrayal. Sobieski offers Nelson's character no excuses other than the lure of young poontang when away from home. Both Willie Nelson & Alan Alda would go on to do many more movies.

After "The Seduction of Joe Tynan," all of Alda's other scripts would be directed by Alda himself, and for a while he'd become a popular, if not important, writer-director-actor in the eighties. But they all would contain a white bread self-pity draped in soft focus sitcom glibness.

Willie Nelson would make many more movies as well. With this and Alan Rudolph's stoned companion piece "Songwriter" being the best.

Carny (1980)

NOVELIZATION and FILM REVIEW

Thomas Baum was a very interesting screenwriter that appeared in the late seventies – eighties. He's mostly known for his nifty Paramount horror thriller The Sender (which he also wrote the novelization for). But his highest profile assignment was the tawdry 1980 carnival drama from Lorimar Carny.

The film was based on a story by Phoebe Kaylor, Robert Kaylor (the director) and Robbie Robertson (the star), based somewhat on Robertson's youth spent traveling around the Midwest and the South with a seedy carnival outfit. Baum was assigned the task of taking Robertson's recollections and the Kaylors' ideas and turning them into a coherent story. A task of which he was only half successful. The film served as Gary Busey's follow up to his Oscar nominated turn as Buddy Holly which positioned him, after a decade of character actor work, as a promising leading man.

It also served as musician Robbie Robertson's dramatic motion picture debut after impressing both audiences and critics in Martin Scorsese's magnificent concert film The Last Waltz. Most reviews of The Last Waltz mentioned that Robertson's handsome John Garfield like intensity would be a natural for a motion picture acting career (he also looked a bit like Robert Forster who also got mileage early on in his career due to his Garfield like resemblance). As well as serving as child star Jodie Foster's first adult lead in a major motion picture.

The story deals with a love triangle set against the world, milieu, and language of hustling, grifting carnies. While life with a traveling circus has been dealt with before, carnival stories have been rather rare. One of the only ones that had been done in the last twenty years before Carny was Elvis' superior vehicle Roustabout (which we've shown many times at The New Beverly).

Roustabout is one of Elvis' most entertaining pictures of that era of Elvis Presley movies. He enters the film on a motorcycle, dressed head to toe in black motorcycle leathers (like Brando in The Wild One). It's the only film where he gets to demonstrate his Ed Parker taught karate. It includes a small bit part early on with Raquel Welch. And contains the best soundtrack of songs of all of his color movies, including a rarity for Elvis on film, a cover of somebody else's rock and roll hit, The Coaster's Little Egypt. And while the carnival includes rides, a

midway, carny games, a hoochie coochie tent, and what looks like a small freak show, it was still a family owned and operated wholesome enterprise.

Carny shows the seedy side of this bottom feeding rung of entertainment (Tobe Hooper's film The Funhouse and Dean Koontz's wildly rewritten novelization covers some of the same ground as Baum's script and book). The film wants to do for carnies what Ron Sheldon's Bull Durham did for minor league baseball. Take you on a tour of a world you never knew, and when you exit, you exit an expert. And in this endeavor the film and the novelization isn't a total failure.

Nevertheless, the missed and fumbled opportunities add up to an ultimately unsatisfying experience. Of the two it's Baum's version of the book that's the best. Because Baum is a good writer, and even when the story falters, which is half the time, he understands the milieu and through his prose is able to take you into the atmosphere. Which in a story like this, the atmosphere is everything.

To call Robert Kaylor's direction of the film lousy, is to de facto insult all other directors, because it implies, he directed anything at all. To direct badly, you first have to direct. When you shoot a glittering-blinking carnival at night you can't help but come back with visually stimulating footage. But Kaylor constantly avoids the midway, placing dramatic scene after scene inside drab tents and trailers (to watch Kaylor's non-existent visual scheme is to appreciate anew Tobe Hooper's filmmaking in regards to his mediocre The Funhouse).

The film contains so many isolated head and shoulder close ups of actors framed against blank walls you'd think Oscar Micheaux was a visual consultant. If the film has an authorial voice, it isn't due to its direction, cinematography, or script (you can tell Baum's book is a response to the film's bastardization of his screenplay).

The reason Carny deserves a look isn't due to anybody behind the camera, but due to the unique combination of manic energy and beyond the beyond naturism that Gary Busey displays in front of it. Believe it or not, the manic hee-hawing buffoon of reality television, was at one time (pre-motorcycle accident), one of the greatest actors of the seventies. Not just a talented journeyman character actor, but an acting giant. And if you don't believe me, ask other acting giants of the seventies like Dustin Hoffman, Martin Sheen, and Jeff Bridges, and they'll tell you. Busey had a gift for a highly theatrical version of naturalism that was unlike any of his peers. And naturally it was unlike anybody else, because it came straight from his soul.

In the seventies Busey had a way of saying dialogue that you couldn't believe any writer could have written it. The only other actor of his era that shared the same combination of naturalism and dynamic intensity was Robert Blake. What most actors pass off as naturalism is usually just awe shucks mumbling. Busey's unaffected line readings were documentary real, but backed by a dramatic storytelling drive that most naturalistic actors don't possess. Kaylor's one moment of directorial achievement, with naturally Busey as its center, is the film's opening credits. A close-up of Busey's character Frankie applying his bozo clown make-up in front of his make-up mirror. Little by little, grease paint stroke by grease paint stroke, the big boned, tombstoned teethed, sweet-faced Oklahoma farm boy turns into the maniacal and malevolent bozo of the midway.

In fact, the entire opening section of the movie, where Jodie Foster's Donna first visits the carnival as a mark with her idiot hometown boyfriend Mickey (played well by a pre-Body Double Craig Wasson) is hands down the most effective part of the film. One, because Kaylor keeps the action taking place on the midway as opposed to retreating to tents. But the film in this first section does a good job of setting up the dynamic between the three lead characters. Frankie (Busey) the carnival bozo clown, who sits in a cage, seated on a platform, six feet above a tank of water, manically taunting the carnival customers through a fuzzy microphone and blown out speakers with the hateful voice of a lunatic, to get them to purchase baseballs in order to dunk him.

His partner in crime Patch (Robbie Robertson), who runs the bozo game, and handles the grift and the payola for the freaks and the carny games with the local authorities. And Donna (Jodie Foster) a local townie mark who visits the show, becomes mesmerized by Frankie's combination of charm and malevolency and runs away with the carnival as it picks up stakes and moves to the next town. After this opening section the movie never really works again. But you can keep watching due to the presence of Busey and Robertson who make a good team and both are effective in their parts. Foster, however, is surprisingly drab.

The Donna of the book is much more vivid (the movie is Frankie's story, while the books is Donna's). But despite Foster's dull performance, she makes an impression anyway due to how young she appears. Her character is supposed to be seventeen, but she looks closer to sixteen, giving the sexual-Toby Tyler-shenanigans that follow an authentic naughty vibe.

Where Baum's book comes into its own is when Donna comes back to the carnival the next day to find Frankie and satisfy her curiosity about this clown that's gotten

into her head (in the book Frankie was in Donna's dreams all night). Baum's best section is Frankie's seduction of the young townie. He takes her to the truck where they keep the stuffed animals they use to lure the marks to the crooked games on the midway. And surrounded by Pink Panthers, Tasmanian Devils, and Yogi Bears, they make love on a pile of Bugs Bunnies and Snoopies. Donna's not naive, she knows this is where Frankie takes girls, and she's not yet in love. But she's fascinated by this roustabout. Especially the fact that the people in her small town, that she's known all her life, don't have a clue about who she is on the inside. Where Frankie (through carny con man tricks) knows what she's going to say before she says it.

The other angle of the novelization that's superior (for awhile) is the depiction of the love triangle between the three characters. In the movie it's a crock. You can believe Robertson's Patch is annoyed by Frankie and Donna's relationship because it's cramping his style, getting in the way of them double fucking townies, and most of all displacing him out of the trailer the two men share. But you don't believe for one minute that Patch actually wants Donna for himself. But in the book Baum emphasizes another angle. Patch is jealous. But not about Donna. Baum even has other carny characters verbalize that it's Frankie that Patch loves. And it's not just used as subtextual homoerotic fun and games. You can believe that Patch is a celibate homosexual who lives with Frankie in a de facto marriage. And their double fucking townies is substitute for the sex they can't or won't have together.

Unfortunately, by the last third Baum has to get back on track with the film's disastrous third act. But in a way, Baum's novelization is like one of rigged carny games that he goes to great pains to depict. It dangles rewards in front of you that it has no intention of yielding. But if you don't invest in the outcome…you can have fun in the participation.

Shogun Assassin (1980)

Reviewed by Jim Sheldon and Quentin Tarantino

In the last week of September 1973 I saw at The Toho La Brea something called The Sword of Vengeance – Part 4, Baby Cart in Peril on a Japanese language double-bill (all prompted by a promising LA Times review by Kevin Thomas). The hero of this blood-soaked popular Japanese series, stoic, semi-mad father Ogami Ittō aka 'Lone Wolf' (Tomisaburô Wakayama), practically had my movie-going companion diving under the seats, as Ogami Ittō's samurai sword turned hundreds into limbless, throbbing, artery-spurting corpses (I gave the clever carnage a B+).

I wondered how long, considering how popular Hong Kong Kung Fu crap was, it would take for an American distributor to bring Lone Wolf and his Baby cart from hell to a grindhouse or drive-in near you.

Columbia Pictures was the first out of the gate, when they took Sword of Vengeance – Part 3, Baby Cart to Hades, and released it as Lightning Swords of Death. But then seven years later, here comes the now Corman-less New World Pictures, Shogun Assassin. But remember, until recently, the MPAA had been slapping bloody Japanese flicks with X ratings for violence (the fate of New Line Cinema's superior Sonny Chiba starrer The Streetfighter). That this crimson red showstopper, where people shower the landscape with red hemoglobin as if they had garden hoses for veins, managed only a R rating, shows cooler heads prevailing at the ever more reasonable MPAA.

Now, tricked up with extremely impressive English language dubbing, and a new buzzy electronic score by none other than Mark Lindsay (former lead singer for those top 40 bubblegum goofballs Paul Revere and The Raiders), to deliver a bloody good time to unsuspecting patrons. A small section of the first film (Sword of Vengeance, the origin part), and most of the second entry (Baby Cart at the River Styx) has been stitched together to provide American audiences with Shogun Assassin.

The story is simplicity itself. A young toddler (The Lone Wolf's infant son, Daigoro played by Akihiro Tomikawa) recalls, via voice-over narration, his ma's death at the hands of the evil shogun's minions (dad used to be wicked Shogun's head head-chopper) – and Dad's eternal Vengeance as one deadly foe after another

comes looking for the undefeatable, vaguely demonic, Ogami Ittō (though, like Eastwood in Josey Wales, he basically wants to be left alone).

The fact that little Daigoro narrates the adventure, changes the story somewhat from its original Japanese origin. As David Chute pointed out in his review for The LA Herald Examiner, in the Japanese flicks, despite six films in the series, the kid never ever says a word. Chute claims this robs the little brat of his wordless demonic quality. Well, maybe it does. But his narration is pretty well-written, and it goes a long way to starting the film off in a classy manner.

Among the dozen or more comic book styled villains that come looking for killer and son, include a group of Ninja assassin women, the Shogun's son, and a deadly trio that call themselves The Three Masters of Death (they kill via claw, club, and mailed fist), as well as countless others. Highlights include, jugular spray, hacked off flying limbs, faces are bisected vertically, and from behind we see a head split in half like a Yubari melon.

In a particularly gruesome section we see the killer women hack a man to literal pieces, and the Death Trio kill a small army as way of introduction to the audience. As fans of the series are already hip to, the kiddies baby cart is also packed with anti-personnel cutting accouterments. The deliciously stylish Kenji Misumi direction and Chriski Makiura's wide-screen Metrocolor lensing pop the eyes. This American coat of paint that New World added to the Japanese original, is well done and depending which one you see first, could be considered an improvement. But in a really cheeky move that screams disrespect, original director Kenji Misumi is removed from the directorial credit replaced by some bozo named Robert Houston. The sullen Ogami Ittō and his small fry sidekick were taken to heart by the hooting it up Hollywood action crowd.

(Original Baby Cart at the River Styx version, A-. Yankee meddled version Shogun Assassin, B+).

Ms. 45 (1981)

Reviewed by Jim Sheldon and Quentin Tarantino

Ms.45, despite an ad campaign that suggests a distaff *Death Wish*, is actually a reasonably competent, but hopelessly nihilistic, urban nightmare about a young woman driven bonkers after enduring two separate rapes in one day.

Mute Manhattan garment district worker Thana (Zoë Tamerlis, giving the best lead performance in an exploitation film of that year), who works for seemingly-gay but probably bi-lecherous Albert Sinkys, is yanked into an alley on her way home from the grocer, and is bent over a garbage can and fucked up the ass at gunpoint by masked booty bandit Jimmy Laine (really, director Abel Ferrara). Then, once home, she's confronted by armed burglar Peter Yellen, who proceeds to rape her more conventionally.

She manages to bludgeon him to death with a paperweight and an iron, cut up his bod into separate pieces in her bathtub (minimal gore, the fact she keeps him clothed, including his black leather jacket, accounts for some of the effective black comedy pertaining to the disposal of his body), refrigerate the disembodied limbs, for later dispersal all over town in various New York trash cans (a shrieking bum will find a hand, the authorities will find the head). After hallucinations and an at-work bit of delayed-reaction hysteria – watch out men!

A New York street trash goofball gets blasted by Zoë in an alley for returning her bag (the gun belongs to the first rapist, and magically never runs out of bullets). Steve Singer, a Looking for Mr. Goodbar-type, gets shot inside his pussy pad (the biggest splatter belongs to him). Talky-depressed bar patron Jack Thibeau, shares with her a one-sided heart-to-heart talk (in a funny bit, he tells his tale of romantic disappointment to Zoë, so self-obsessed, he never realizes she's mute), which leads to a confusing suicide (?) of Thibeau.

Then Zoë, Bronson-style, switches to a seductive whore-like persona and goes looking for male victims to shoot full of holes. Including a whore-beating black pimp, a cruising Arab sheik and his chauffeur, and a number of encircling gang members in Central Park (by the time she's facing down an entire gang, like Eastwood in a spaghetti western, the film has become officially ludicrous, but also, despite the ugliness of the set-up, a groovy gas).

After recent cinematic depictions (“The Exterminator”, “Wolfen”, “Escape from New York”, “Night of the Juggler”, “Fort Apache: The Bronx”) if Thana dropped an atomic bomb on the big apple, she would seem justified. And at first, we root for Zoë to blast every son-of-a-bitch she comes across, whether they deserve it or not. But then we watch her narrowly miss out on plugging an innocent Chinese lad, we realize that Thana has gone full Deneuve in “Repulsion”.

All leading to a climatic .45 Caliber massacre at the Halloween office party (Thana dresses in a nun’s habit, and in a nice touch, she kiss blesses the bullets she loads for her final kill). Director Abel Ferrara and screenwriter Nicholas St. John certainly don’t like to linger (at 74 minutes, the film’s ten minutes shorter than when reviewed by Variety in April). James Momel’s nighttime NYC photography impresses, and Joe Delia’s tortured-sax score annoys, but stays in your head. In a few years time, this could prove a popular cult film. As well as an impressive calling card for both director Ferrara and mesmerizing star Tamerlis.

Like a beautiful flower growing out of a rat’s ass (B+).

JOHN MILIUS (1982)

This interview with writer-director John Milius was conducted when I was twenty years old (and boy does it show). The last film he had done at the time was Conan the Barbarian. I just called up his assistant and told her I was writing a book, and she set me up with an interview with him. I met with him twice for the interview. The first time was in his office on the Paramount lot. The second time was on the set of the film Uncommon Valor, which he was producing. He told me he didn't want Gene Hackman for the lead, he wanted James Arness! Later I was to become friends with Big John. At the beginning of '95, before the Academy Awards, I was taken duck hunting by John Milius, Steven Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis. John and I sat in a duck blind all day, sipping whiskey out of a flask, talking about movies and shooting the tail feathers off of ducks. This is only part of it. Later I'll transcribe more.

QT: Starting off I'd like you to know, The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean is my favorite screenplay.

JM: Gee, thank you. I really like that too. I hope you read my screenplay. The screenplay is much much better than the movie.

QT: Now you received sole credit on the screenplay, but I heard you say in interviews that John Huston ruined your screenplay?

JM: Well, he made me do all the writing (the director of Judge Roy Bean, John Huston). But he'd say I want you to do this' an' that', mostly out of inattention.

QT: If you would of directed it, as you intended, how would it have been different?

JM: It would have been a lot different! The movie now is kinda' a poor man's Butch Cassidy or something. I think it has a lack of commitment – totally. It doesn't really look like one thing or another. All the people – I adore Paul Newman, I think he's a wonderful actor, but, I don't think, he would ever be the best choice for Judge Roy Bean. And on and on. All the characters, the people who play little parts in the movie, little cameos and things. The look of the movie was never quite right to me. There's a tone to the movie, it's a very kind of fritzy, almost I hate to say it, a Beverly Hills western. There's a feeling to it now that wasn't there originally. It's a much stronger movie in the screenplay.

QT: In the script, it's a very down and dirty blood and guts type of western.

JM: It was a very harsh movie.

QT: But now they have all these cameos, this star comes walking in –

JM: – Yeah, all that stuff was in the screenplay, that these characters narrated. There was a terrific amount of humor in the original screenplay. More humor than was in this one (the movie). But it still had a feel that was closer to say a Sergio Leone movie.

QT: Sorta like Once Upon a Time in the West?

JM: Yeah, closer to that than what it is. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly would probably be a good example.

QT: When most people think of you they think, Mr. Macho.

JM: (laughing) Now isn't that a terrible thing?

QT: It seems like anytime a critic reviews one of your films, before they say word one about the movie, they refer to you as Mr. Macho –

JM: – Bloodthirsty or something like that.

QT: When Time Magazine reviewed Conan the Barbarian, it was either Time or Newsweek, they referred to you as The Peck's Bad Boy of the USC Mob.

Milius lets out an uproarious laugh.

JM: I don't mind being The Peck's Bad Boy! I'll take that. I like that a lot better than Mr.Macho. I was called by Andrew Sarris a gifted barbarian. But I don't suppose I can have that title anymore since I made Conan the Barbarian.

QT: Well an offset to that in Judge Roy Bean is that the Judge is extremely romantic. First there's the way he feels and speaks about Lily Langtry (the famous stage actress he loves from afar), then there's the scene in the desert with Maria Elena (Victoria Principal). And he asks her what she wants? And she says, I'd like a box you open it and it makes song. He says, Ya' mean a music box? Why I'd get

ya' a pipe organ! Then he sings The Yellow Rose of Texas to her. He's old and crusty, but in his own way romantic and eloquent.

JM: I'm a hopeless romantic! That's the one thing I am above everything else! All my movies are filled with rapid romanticism.

QT: The last scene when Lily Langtry reads the letter the Judge wrote is just beautiful.

JM: That was much better in the script. Because in the script he comes back, and there's this big gunfight. He wasn't a ghost like he was in the movie. He comes back this old beaten man. And his daughter's in trouble with all the new elements in the town, which were much better portrayed in the script. Much more realistic and detailed. There is a bad element in the town. Unlike the movie, she's not this tough girl who's gonna shoot it out with everybody. But he comes back and she never knows it's him. And singlehandedly, this drunken old man, goes down and wipes all these guys out, and gets killed. And only Tector –

QT: – The Ned Beatty character?

JM: Yes. Is left alive and knows it was him. And he puts him in a pine box and the next day or two is when Lily Langtry comes to town. The coffin is being put on the train as she reads the letter. (laughing to himself) I remember there's a whole thing I love about she's reading the letter and there's a couple of guys arguing about whether or not to put the box on the train in the heat because it's going to stink. Whether or not to put it in the back of the train or the front. (laughing) It's the hero of the movie, and they're complaining about how he'll stink when he decomposes and they'll have to worry about his smell. She's reading the letter about how we'll be together and you see the reflection in the window of them shoving the coffin on the train. Then they go off together. He never meets her, but when he finally leaves the town he created, he leaves with Lily Langtry. It's a very powerful scene, with a tear coming off her eye. But the thing that was nice was the daughter never knows her father came back.

QT: I don't know. That was such a good scene in the movie, their conversation together.

JM: They meet, but he doesn't say he's her father. He just says, I was one of your father's marshals.

QT: So the marshals don't come back?

JM: No. The marshals are long gone. He alone wipes them out. And he says to his daughter, I just rode with him. Your father was a great man. Not like me. I never measured up to your father. Very, very, very, powerful scene.

QT: You describe yourself as a hopeless romantic. But to me the section in Dillinger that doesn't work are the scenes in the middle when Dillinger (Warren Oates) and Billie Frechette (Michelle Phillips) go off together. The whole sort of romantic montage of them in the rowboat, walking in the woods, it looked like you didn't really have your heart in it. However, later in the movie, during the big shoot out, Billie Frechette grabs a Tommy Gun and starts blasting G-Men giving Dillinger the cover he needs yelling, run Johnny run! Now that was romantic!

JM: Well loyalty is always a quality that I admire in people. If people are loyal to each other that's very meaningful. (NOTE: Years later I use that exact line in Pulp Fiction) It's very easy to be in love with one another. It's very easy to be enraptured with ideas. But whether or not you can remain loyal is a test of who you are. When you've given your word it's very important – it's a moral test of one's self whether or not you can maintain loyalty.

QT: Warren Oates really represented as Dillinger a real man of the thirties brought to his circumstances through the climate of the times. However I wonder if a more man of action type would have better suited your purposes. An actor like William Smith. You can believe Michelle Phillips would kill anybody to save William Smith. Not Warren Oates.

JM: Warren was always one of my favorite actors. I wanted Warren to be the Judge.

QT: I thought you wanted Lee Marvin?

JM: Yeah I did. But originally I wanted to make it very cheap. I wanted it to be my first movie and make it for less than we spent on Dillinger actually. Shoot in Spain. In some crummy little town, a Sergio Leone leftover and have Warren be the Judge. I think Warren would have been wonderful in that role. Something absolutely terrific. As Dillinger he was very good. But maybe William Smith would of been a more dynamic Dillinger. Warren really filled out that part as well.

QT: Since I brought him up, let me just say your casting of William Smith as Conan's father is brilliant. When I was living in Tennessee with my grandmother, I was in the fifth grade, I loved to go to the movies, but there weren't any theatres in our town. We just had one drive-in, The South Clinton Drive-In. Except for southern movies like White Lightning and Walking Tall they never had current movies. It was usually exploitation movies. But exploitation movies from a few years earlier. So a lot of biker movies. Which mostly starred William Smith. Chrome and Hot Leather, Angels Hard as They Come, The Losers.

JM: I love The Losers. The one where they go to Vietnam?

QT: Yeah.

JM: Big inspiration for Apocalypse Now.

QT: Really? The Losers?

JM: Yeah, bikers in Vietnam, surfers in Vietnam, same idea. I wrote a whole piece in Film Comment about how bikers are misunderstood. I wrote in Easy Rider Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper died for the sins of William Smith.

QT: William Smith is my favorite actor. He usually plays bad guys. But I'd like to see him play more heroic parts. I think he's like Charles Bronson was in the sixties. Like Bronson, I think he could make the transition from villain to hero.

JM: There's no doubt about that.

QT: That's why I was excited to see him play a heroic part in Conan, and not just some bad guy barbarian that Conan kills.

JM: Yeah I love his scene in the movie. I love when he gives his big speech at the beginning. The riddle of steel. It's not much, but I love it. And the fact he fought valiantly for the village against the horde. And was done in by a pack of Rottweilers!(laughing) They had to be Rottweilers to bring down William Smith!

QT: You produced Hardcore for Paul Schrader?

JM: Yes. A wonderful script that turned out to be a lousy movie. I blame Paul's direction for that.

QT: I heard at one point it was going to be Warren Beatty in the George C. Scott role. And absurdly going to be Beatty's wife who runs off to do porno films and not his daughter?

JM: That was just embarrassing. (Beatty) Seducing Paul like a girl, talking him into it.

QT: Schrader said they made him change the ending from what he'd originally written?

JM: (Milius snorts) Nobody made him change anything, he did exactly what he wanted.

QT: I love his film Rolling Thunder.

JM: He wrote that for me to direct.

QT: (surprised) He did?

JM: He wrote the script and gave it to me, and said, this is your movie.

QT: Why didn't you do it?

JM: Oh, I don't know. I didn't think I wanted to do something that dark at the time.

QT: I interviewed the director John Flynn, and he said Schrader's script was un-filmable?

JM: No…it was terrific. (lost in thought, remembering it) Boy it was a good script, with wonderful stuff in it. Paul at his best.

MONTE HELLMAN (1993)

lf I had to pick the five greatest western directors of all time, the problem wouldn't be to pick five, but to figure out how many westerns a director had to make to be considered a western director. Does one film do it? Can I make a case for Marlon Brando, since One-Eyed Jacks is one of my five favorite westerns? How about Philip Kaufman? Can I with good conscience put him on the list above King Vidor, Henry Hathaway and Sam Peckinpah, on the strength of The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid (the best of the Jesse James movies with Robert Duvall, the scariest and most psychotic Jesse on film), and writing the script (and directing about a week) of The Outlaw Josey Wales.

This dilemma solved itself when I came to Monte Hellman. There's no way in hell Monte ain't going on the list. I don't care if he's only done three, but two of them – Ride in the Whirlwind and The Shooting – demand that honour. Monte also made me come to grips with the whole Marlon Brando/One-Eyed Jacks problem, because much as I like The Shooting, had he never made it, just doing Ride would have been enough for me.

Producer Fred Roos, who would later produce Apocalypse Now, had a deal to do two films in the Philippines to be shot concurrently. He had seen Roger Corman's The Terror, starring Boris Karloff and Jack Nicholson, and had heard that two young directors had shot the majority of it. Their names were Monte Hellman and Francis Ford Coppola. Roos's response was "send me either one". Monte got the job.

The deal was simple. Roos had to make two cheap action-adventure film set in the Philippines. He had the script for one, a war film called Back Door to Hell, but the second one was open. Monte suggested that they use the young actor from The Terror, Jack Nicholson, who he knew was also a screenwriter. The idea was that Jack would act in Back Door to Hell, write the script for the second film, and act in that one as well. The script Nicholson wrote was Flight to Fury.

Monte's first film, Beast From the Haunted Cave, written by the great Charles Griffith, was a lot of fun. Back Door to Hell is pretty good, but Flight to Fury was the first of the great Monte Hellman pictures, and Little Shop of Horrors aside, the first film in which Jack Nicholson came into his own as an actor. Nicholson, in a part he wrote for himself, finally had the assurance, the experience, the words and the director to deliver the performance that bad eluded him up to this point.

The film's other lead was Howard Hawks's regular Dewey Martin (The Big Sky, The Thing), an underrated actor who should have done better in the 50s than he did. Nicholson's feral, hip, cerebral, 60s style of acting plays well with Martin's hardboiled, tough 50s cool-guy style. (On a personal note, I get a special kick from watching them because Martin resembles Michael Madsen in my movie Reservoir Dogs, and Nicholson resembles actor Steve Buscemi.)

The teaming of Hellman and Nicholson played well too. As can be seen from the film l made, I like what l call 'kitchen-sink movies', which means 'there's everything in it but…', and there are about four movies crammed into Flight to Fury.

The first 15 minutes are an action adventure murder mystery full of exotic locations (the Philippines), a rugged hero (Martin), a sexy Oriental femme fatale (who will be dead by the fourth scene), and shifty characters who are not what they appear (Nicholson at first appears to be a likable nerdy guy, but then is quickly revealed to be an ice-cold killer with a hidden agenda).

Then Martin and Nicholson hop on an aeroplane, where we're introduced to a whole new batch of interesting and suspicious characters. After flying the friendly skies with them for about 20 minutes, as they sniff each other out and philosophise (Nicholson's conversation about death with a fellow passenger, the late Jacqueline Hellman, seems to come straight out of a Hal Hartley movie), in what plays like the oddest and greatest Airport movie ever made, the plane crashes. Which turns the film into a skewed version of Max Frisch's novel Homo Faber, as the survivors stranded in the jungle fight to stay alive, fight bands of marauding pirates, and fight and kill one another.

Hellman and Nicholson made a terrific little film and a terrific team, so a partnership between the two was struck. Nicholson wrote a script for a western that the two could do cheap, and they took that script, Ride in the Whirlwind, to Roger Corman.

Corman liked Nicholson's script very much and agreed to do it. Then added, in that way that has made the man a legend, "Since you'll be out there on location, why don't you do two movies?" So the two partners repeated the duties they had just done with Fred Roos in the Philippines: shooting the two movies concurrently with the same crew, Nicholson writing and starring in one, acting in the other and

Hellman directing both. However, this time Nicholson would produce both films as well.

The other film was The Shooting, starring Warren Oates, Millie Perkins, Will Hutchins (then star of the television show Sugarfoot) and Nicholson as a Jack Palance-inspired gunfighter named Billy Spear. The script was written by a friend of Nicholson's from Jeff Corey's acting class, Carole Eastman, who would go on to write for Nicholson Five Easy Pieces, The Fortune and Man Trouble. Her script, written under the pseudonym Adrien Joyce, is like a metaphysical version of Budd Boetticher's Ride Lonesome. Corman apparently hated it, but proceeded anyway because it was the only one ready to go, and at that price he couldn't lose.

Today The Shooting is widely considered the masterpiece of the two. Kevin Thomas, film critic for the Los Angeles Times, wrote: "The difference between the two [Ride in the Whirlwind and The Shooting] is the difference between the definitely good and the arguably great." Most critics in France and the US agree (with Michel Ciment an important exception), and Monte himself prefers The Shooting.

But for me, it's the simplicity, the naturalistic tone, the awkward-sounding (because it's so authentic) cowboy vernacular, the feeling of sadness that's between every line, the burst of ridiculous comic moments, the beautiful underplaying of Nicholson and Cameron Mitchell, all wrapped up in a wing-ding plot, that make Ride in the Whirlwind one of the most authentic and brilliant westerns ever made.

Monte made westerns unlike any before or since. He slowed down all the action so the scenes play at a real-time pace unheard of in a western. The effect is almost as if Monte were in the projection booth, grabbing a fistful of film as it passes in front of the bulb and yanking it down, so each frame is illuminated longer for better examination. The film opens with a stagecoach hold-up that produces giggles due to the lazy, laconic manner of the robbers. It's the exact opposite of the snappy action scenes we've become accustomed to (a robber gets a laugh from me every time for the way he unhurriedly moves a log out of the stagecoach's way). In direct contrast with Monte's tone is Nicholson's plot, which is far from existential. In fact, it could easily be a great rip-snorting episode of Bonanza.

From innocent to outlaw

Three cowhands riding together, Wes (Nicholson), Vern (Mitchell) and Otis (Tom Filer), come across a gang of desperados holed up in a shack. The desperados have

just robbed the local stage and are hiding out. The outlaws figure these saddle tramps want nothing more than to bed down (they're right), so they oblige them. The cowhands put two and two together real fast and figure out these are bad men and "look forward to partin' company with them fellas" in the morning; however, morning brings a posse hellbent on shootin' and hangin' everybody. Filer is shot, and Nicholson and Mitchell escape with the posse hot on their trail. The two men, scared and sorrowful (because of the death of their friend, beautifully conveyed by the way Nicholson just folds up in grief after dismounting from his horse) must now make their way out of the territory on foot, all the while trying to keep two steps ahead of the ever-approaching posse. "lf we get some horses we're out of it", Nicholson says.

So to that end they commandeer a ranch tended by an old man (George Mitchell) and his wife (Katherine Squire), and their 19-year-old daughter (Millie Perkins). Holding the family hostage and stealing their stock turns the two innocents into the outlaws the posse believes them to be.

One of the truly brilliant things about the movie is Nicholson's sparse and authentic western dialogue, taken from letters and journals of that time. These are inarticulate people living in simple times using a spare vocabulary. Sometimes this language is funny, as when the three cowhands come across a hanged man and, after looking at him a good long while, Nicholson responds, "Man gets hanged". At other times, it's moving, as when instead of going on and on about how they're innocent and it ain't fair, or how scared they are, Nicholson says to Mitchell on the run, with just the right touch of emotion, "No one's gonna put a name to me and that's it."

Attempts to explain their innocence to the family fall on deaf ears. This family's existence seems to be a hand-to-mouth one: they live on an ugly, barren piece of dirt away from any other people (when anyone approaches their world, they become threatened). The old man doesn't work a farm, he just chops monotonously all day at a tree stump with an axe. The women just seem to cook grub.

These people have nothing and then these two dangerous outlaws (as they're told earlier by the posse) take what little they have… the old man's dignity (he runs the small shack like a king, but now must let two other men dominate him in his kingdom and rule over his women), and what little they own of value, their stock (horses). It is in the attempts of these two non-verbal men to articulate their innocence and desperation to their innocent and desperate hostages that the film achieves a rare sorrow. As Mitchell and Nicholson sit at their table after eating

their food, and play checkers, as the old man whacks away outside at the formidable stump, Mitchell says, “We borrow their checkers, we steal their horses, there just don’t seem to be no end to it.” “No use to that,” Nicholson replies.

The acting has a strangely eccentric quality. Harry Dean Stanton as the outlaw leader Blind Dick, and Squire and George Mitchell as the old folks, are right as rain. When I met Harry Dean Stanton I told him how much I loved Ride. He said, “That’s the best western I was ever in, and one of the best I ever saw”.

But Peter Cannon as a hotheaded outlaw and Millie Perkins give some eccentric line readings. Cannon’s voice has a strangely effeminate quality, “I shoulda picked them off original”: Perkins’s performance is an oddball classic. Her “Yes, we do” when they ask if she has any checkers has affected the way I say “Yes, I do”. But Hellman built the film around the performances of Cameron Mitchell and Jack Nicholson, and it’s easy to see why… these two men are terrific.

To see Cameron Mitchell do the subtle, unmannered, personal work he does here is to shed a tear for all the wonderful actors in film who never had the opportunity to fly where their talent could have taken them.

To see Mitchell, who has since unfortunately gone the way of Aldo Ray (another talented actor of the 50s), appearing in anything, including porno movies, that will pay his price, do the subtle, unmannered, personal work he does here is to shed a tear for all the wonderful actors in film who never had the opportunity to fly where their talent could have taken them. When a fine actor, who has managed to keep his instincts even after appearing in junk for a long time, gets a real role with something to play, a special light goes on in his eyes. You can see it in Martin Landau’s performances in Tucker, Joe Don Baker’s scene-stealing turn in The Natural, and Richard Crenna’s menacing dinner table conversation in Body Heat – all performances in big pictures that stopped or saved those actors from plunging into an exploitation movie hell. That same light shines brightly in Mitchell’s eyes throughout Ride in the Whirlwind, and it’s that light that accounts for what must be the finest performance of his long career.

Star in the making

Jack Nicholson, on the other hand, went on to become one of the biggest stars in the history of movies. Both a great star and a great actor, but more than that, Nicholson has passed over into cultural-icon status like Bogart, John Wayne, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and Madonna (witness the references to him in Disney’s

Aladdin, and Christian Slater's homage in Heathers). Anybody who tunes into Ride in the Whirlwind as a curiosity to see the work of a star-in-the-making will be shocked.

Nicholson's work in Ride ranks as one of his finest performances, as Robert De Niro's work in Mean Streets is one of his finest performances. Not only is Nicholson wonderful as Wes, but he does the kind of no-nonsense meat-and-potatoes work I'd love to see him do again (the closest he's come recently is his work in the much-maligned The Two Jakes, which I, for one, loved). Seeing Nicholson play small, after a decade of playing large, reminds us that Nicholson became the icon he is not just by being a great Nicholson, but by being a great actor.

If ever a director was due for critical rediscovery, it would be Monte Hellman. With his naturalistic style and pace, his invisibly punchy editing rhythms, and the journeys his characters inevitably set sail on, his influence can be found in the work of such directors as Hartley, Wim Wenders, Jim Jarmusch, and Terrence Malick (as Pauline Kael noted, though unfavourably, in her review of Badlands). This year Monte starts a new film, Dark Passion, based on the Lionel White novel Obsession, which Godard used as his jumping-off point for Pierrot le fou. Movie theatres would be much happier places with a new Monte Hellman movie playing in them.

PETER BOGDANOVICH

THE MAN WHO SHOT LIKE THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE

Among The Movie Brats, there was a tremendous amount of John Ford adulation (Scorsese, Spielberg, Schrader and John Milius) and then there was Peter Bogdanovich.For one, Bogdanovich's Ford influence extended beyond The Searchers. Peter was a true student of Ford's filmography. And it was both his writings on and his friendship with the man, as well as many other old pros like Hawks & Hitchcock, that helped Peter break into the business. Yet unlike his other Ford loving contemporaries, Scorsese and Spielberg, he doesn't pay homage to the one-eyed old man by having characters watch Ford's films. Even when that would be easy to do, like The Last Picture Show (that honor he reserves for Hawks). Bogdanovich and his then wife, Polly Platt, would spend time on the old man's sets, including a wonderful piece Peter would write for Esquire on the set of Ford's late-career apologia Cheyenne Autumn (which is where the couple would meet their friend Sal Mineo, who would later give Peter the novel of The Last Picture Show). Bogdanovich would direct for the American Film Institute a tribute documentary about the old man titled Directed By John Ford, which would get amusing mileage from Bogdanovich, including the irascible old helmer's smartass answers to the puckishly young pups questions.

PETER: Mr. Ford, you made a picture called Three Bad Men. You had quite an elaborate land rush in it. How'd you shoot that?

FORD: With a camera.

But despite popular critical consensus during Bogdanovich's most active career period, I reject that there's an overt Ford influence on his filmography.

The two films most commonly thought of as being Ford-influenced are The Last Picture Show & Paper Moon. So let's examine those two examples.The story of The Last Picture Show takes place in 1955 in a postage-stamp-sized town in Texas called Anarene. And it follows a few of its citizens, Sam the Lion (Ben Johnson), the town's patriarch. Lois Farrow (Ellen Burstyn), the trophy wife of the local oil baron. Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman), the lonely wife of the high school football coach. Genevieve (Eileen Brennan), the waitress of the town's favorite diner.But the movie and the book focus on two football-playing high school seniors, Sonny Crawford (Timothy Bottoms) & Duane Jackson (Jeff Bridges) as they chase, court

and fight over Jacy Farrow (Cybill Shepherd), the prettiest girl in Anarene and daughter of the richest man in the county (Lois is her mother).A description of the plot wouldn't amount to much more than a TV Guide synopsis of an episode of Peyton Place.

Duane and Jacy go on a double date with Sonny and Charlene Duggs (Sharon Taggart).

Sonny starts an affair with the football coach's wife, Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman).

Duane takes Jacy to Wichita Falls for their big "date."

Sonny and Duane spend the night together before Duane ships off to Korea. They see the "last picture show."

In fact, Peyton Place was a jumping-off point for novelist Larry McMurtry to write the book in the first place. Except instead of the Ivy-covered walls, manicured green lawns and the huge oak trees of Peyton Place, you have the dusty, windy, practically deserted Texas town of Anarene, with its limited people living their limited lives. McMurtry writes the book from a more anthropological perspective than most other how I grew up to write the book books. Especially a Texas anthropological perspective. As opposed to Bogdanovich's film, McMurtry's novel has a decided lack of compassion when it comes to the characters in Anarene. It's almost as if McMurtry is saying, I grew up with these people, I know them and I know they're idiots. When Peter's film was released in 1971, it was greeted as an instant classic. Not least of which is because it looked like a classic. A problem with shooting period movies in color is the motion pictures most vivid visual component could turn out to be the ugly colors of the costumes. A problem Bogdanovich avoided by shooting the film in widescreen black and white (it's actually closer to black and grey).Three years after Bogdanovich would shoot a small town in Texas in the fifties, in American Graffiti George Lucas would shoot a small town in California in the early sixties. While Lucas' film takes place in 1962, part of the point of the film is the town's so small it's still stuck in the fifties. So the college that Curt (Richard Dreyfuss) and Steve (Ron Howard) are supposed to fly off to the next morning represents more than just a normal rite of passage for the two young men. The college represents the growing consciousness of the sixties that exists beyond the Brigadoon-ish town that they're escaping.

Lucas invokes the candy-colored pop ephemera of the fifties. The green hues of the fluorescent bulbs that light the liquor stores, hamburger stands and pinball arcades that the characters loiter around. The bright colors of the jukeboxes, diner neon signs and the candy apple red and canary yellow of the hot rods that cruise up and down the main drag. Lucas poignantly parades all this in front of us with the added knowledge that all this glorious chrome and paint and pomade is about to go out of style and be replaced by space-age sixties chic.

Bogdanovich, on the other hand, went the other way. Ben Hur cinematographer Robert Surtees' silky photography had the effect of draining every modern aspect out of the movie. Peter's picture was the first studio film in a few years to shoot in black and white, not for financial reasons, but artistic ones.While after Bogdanovich, a few other filmmakers shot studio pictures in black and white, but with the exception of Bob Fosse's Lenny and Joan Micklin Silver's Hester Street, it was almost always done to better approximate the genre the film took place in. Mel Brooks shoots Young Frankenstein in black and white to invoke the Universal monster movies of the thirties. Carl Reiner shoots Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid in black and white to match-up with the forties film noir clips they use. Even Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull uses its black and white photography to invoke New York street classics of the thirties, forties and fifties, as well as the classic boxing pictures like Body and Soul, The Champion and The Set-Up (and to make it not look like Rocky).

Bogdanovich shoots black and white on The Last Picture Show to invoke the period, realism and loneliness of the story. But on the other hand, it's shimmery monochromatic grey on black photography and classic framing suggests, like Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner's films do, the trappings of a film genre of another time. But in this case, it's not an obvious genre like horror films or private detective movies. The look of the The Last Picture Show suggests a prestige Hollywood picture of the fifties (From Here to Eternity, A Place in the Sun, Home from the Hill). The exact kind of film you can imagine Sonny & Duane watching at the town's lone movie theatre. And due to both Bogdanovich and McMurtry's old soul quality, the movie actually feels like a fifties film. Yet the material, while never being explicit, deals with its subject of sexual repression and sexual exploration in an upfront, straightforward manner that would have been impossible for a Hollywood movie in the fifties. So while The Last Picture Show looked like a classic fifties Hollywood movie, it didn't sound like one. When they talk about sex, it's not camouflaged in euphemisms.

In an Otto Preminger film of the fifties, when Jeff Bridges takes Cybill Shepherd to a motel to have sex for the first time, they wouldn't have announced what they're going to do (I'm positive much to Otto's chagrin). But while the characters wouldn't just come out and state that they're going to have sex, Preminger would imply it. And the adults in the audience would know (he hoped) what Preminger intended without it having to be spelled out. Almost everything involving Cybill Shepherd's character Jacy would have to be camouflaged. But that was fifties Hollywood filmmaking. All the best sellers and the big theatrical dramas of the day got the sex drained out of them when they inevitably received their big Hollywood screen adaptation (From Here to Eternity).So in its own way The Last Picture Show demonstrated both the freedom of New Hollywood, but also the promise of what post-war Hollywood could have been all along if only Hollywood hadn't decided to be so stubbornly immature.

But getting back to John Ford, where's the influence? Did Ford deal with the fifties as a cultural era? Did Ford deal with coming-of-age in a time of sexual repression?Both thematically with its study of simmering fifties-era sexual repression and visually with its luscious black and white photography and classic CinemaScope framing, if The Last Picture Show is influenced by any classic director it would be George Stevens. The reverence that the Communities of John Ford pictures have towards ritual is not championed by Bogdanovich (or novelist Larry McMurtry) but subverted.Both Bogdanovich and McMurtry even poke fun at the Texas characters' obsession with high school football.

Now Bogdanovich did have an undeniable creative stroke that was absolutely influenced by John Ford, and that was the casting of Ben Johnson in his Oscar-winning portrayal of Sam the Lion. His face, his voice, his white straw cowboy hat and his moral authority all invoke John Ford's western mythos (interestingly, Bogdanovich first considered Gower Gulch cowboy matinee idol Tex Ritter for the part).The other big influence that John Ford had on The Last Picture Show was when Johnson initially turned down the role, supposedly due to the film's bad language (Peter claims it wasn't so much that the dialogue was salty, it was there was too much of it. Johnson hated memorizing lines). It was the one-eyed old man himself who talked the laconic bronco buster into finally accepting the part ("Jesus Christ Johnson, you wanna' be Duke's sidekick for the rest of your life?").

After Bogdanovich established Ben Johnson as not only an Academy Award-winning actor, but the living embodiment of the John Ford western mythos, both Spielberg and Milius followed suit by casting Johnson as Texas-twanged

lawmen in The Sugarland Express and Dillinger. Not till Spielberg would shoot Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones would an actor in one of his pictures get the star treatment that Johnson gets in Sugarland Express. Milius wants to invoke Ford via Johnson so much in Dillinger that he casts the fifty-nine-year-old cowboy actor to play F.B.I. agent Melvin Purvis, despite the fact that Purvis was twenty-nine when he executed America's Public Enemy Number One (while it's probably true Johnson hated memorizing dialogue, few actors have done as well reciting Milius' flowery macho poetry as Ben Johnson).However, Ben Johnson's best performance of the decade wasn't in The Last Picture Show or The Sugarland Express or Dillinger, but in James Frawley's hysterical hippie western Kid Blue. As Sheriff Mean John Simpson, Johnson, with the help of Bud Shrake's highly quotable dialogue, completely subverts his folksy cowboy persona.Turning the tall laconic cowboy, the arbiter of moral authority, into a racist, hippie-hating, skull-busting southern cop transplanted into the old west ("When I say stop, you plant roots").

Then there's Paper Moon.

Where's Ford in that?

Since when did Ford represent the thirties? He didn't even represent the thirties in the thirties, Frank Capra did. Yes, of course, he did The Grapes of Wrath. But I don't see a connection, other than sharing the same era, between The Grapes of Wrath and Paper Moon. What does a small comedy about a bible selling conman and his little girl sidekick have to do with a Hollywoodized adaptation of a John Steinbeck social drama?Ford wasn't known for comedies, he did a few, but he wasn't known for them (Donovan's Reef is his most Fordian comedy hit). Nor did the comedies Ford did share the same sense of humor as Paper Moon.

The story concerns Moses Pray (Ryan O'Neal), a traveling bible salesman who preys on vulnerable widows to ply his trade (he convinces them the Bible was purchased by their late spouse). As he breezes through a town in Kansas, he stops off to pay his respects at the funeral of a former Paramore, only to find her nine-year-old daughter Addie Loggins (Tatum O'Neal, Ryan's real-life daughter).O'Neal's Moses is enlisted to ferry the young child to the bus station and put her on a bus to St. Joe Missouri to live with her aunt. But that plan gets scrapped when little Addie proves a cute little tyke can aid and assist in the conning of lonely widows.So after an initial bout of antagonism, Moses realizes he's finally met his grifter match in Addie. Then Peter's film becomes a chronicling of their shady adventures throughout the dust bowl of the American Midwest.

A neat trick that Bogdanovich pulls off in Paper Moon is the film manages to be very heartwarming without ever (really) being sentimental. There's a very sentimental, heart-tugging and even sappy movie running all through Paper Moon.But it's a subtextual movie. The audience wants this movie to be sentimental. So whatever they want these two characters to feel for each other, the audience projects those feelings onto them. But in the actual movie, the characters are pretty stoic. And they never really break that stoicism.

Do they really love each other?

I guess.

But what they really love is the give and take of their grifter partnership. They love how good they are at it. He loves his routine and she loves having a routine. She loves being treated like an adult in their nefarious activities, and he loves not having to treat her like a child. Like Bogdanovich's two earlier films, The Last Picture Show and What's Up, Doc?, Paper Moon felt like an instant classic the day it was released. But while The Last Picture Show looked like a George Stevens prestige fifties film and What's Up Doc? looked like a screwball comedy done in bold primary colors, Paper Moon doesn't look like a movie from the thirties. Instead, it looks like Ryan O'Neal's Moses Pray is driving his jalopy through a series of Depression-era photographs. The American depression era is more convincingly depicted in Paper Moon than it ever was in the thirties, or in any other thirties-set seventies film (The Day of the Locust, Bound for Glory, Chinatown, F.I.S.T., The Sting, Movie Movie or Pennies from Heaven).

And for all the critics (and a jealous Orson Welles) who tried to tie Paper Moon's attributes to The Grapes of Wrath, in every instance Bogdanovich betters his elder. The beauty attached to László Kovács' black and white photography was somehow linked to Ford. Now Ford's photography has always been overrated in my estimation. But I think it's pretty obvious his color films look better than his black and white films (The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance has all the artistry of watching a Technicolor western on black and white television). After the discovery of Tatum O'Neal, Paper Moon's biggest distinction is it's one of the best cast movies ever made (casting by Gary Chason). No fiction movie has ever captured the faces of the people you see stare back at you from thirties photographs with both the accuracy and poignancy of the actors in Paper Moon. Not Bound for Glory, definitely not Chinatown, certainly not The Sting, and least of all Grapes of Wrath. Ford's Hollywoodized novel adaptation is filled with great magnificent

faces (Fonda, Darwell,Carradine) as well. But they are the faces of actors. Every person who opens their front door to find Ryan O'Neal's bible salesman's insincere smile on their front porch seems like a true humanity representative of the time. With the lawman lover of the Widow Bates (Ed Reed) "Hold on one damn minute," delivering in one scene ending line, one of the most heartbreaking moments ever concealed inside a comedy, "If it'll make that woman happy, I'll buy it." Talk about 'a piece of time.'

And for all the cinematic virtuousness of some of the other seventies movie brats, especially when compared to Bogdanovich, the single greatest long take of their cinematic collective isn't any of DePalma's over hill and under dale Steadicam and crane combinations, or even Scorsese's magnificent and witty tour through the Copacabana leading up to Henny Youngman in Goodfellas (though that's pretty spectacular, as is the crane that ends up behind the bucket of blood in Carrie).For me, it's the car mount single take two-shot of Ryan O'Neal's driving Moses Pray and overall-wearing, shotgun-riding tyke Tatum O'Neal's Addie Loggins, as they bicker, fight, break-up and then, finally, get back together ("I guess we'll just hafta' keep on veerin").

Spielberg, Scorsese, Schrader and Milius all quoted Ford or reworked thematic ideas or story points more than Bogdanovich ever did (Hawks is a different story). But critics of his day used Peter's devotion to his elders as a way to delegitimize the young man's talent (in a way they never did to the amateurish Truffaut)."Over twenty years after the fact, in an interview for Andrew Yule's book on him, Picture Shows, Bogdanovich reflected:"Truth to tell, it started because of me. Although for years I never wanted to discuss it, because I couldn't figure out why I'd been so anxious to give away credit. When people asked me about Targets, I said it was my homage to Hitchcock, then I said The Last Picture Show was influenced by The Magnificent Ambersons. In What's Up Doc? I called Ryan "Howard" in a tip of the hat to Hawks. I got myself in that hole simply because I felt bad working when all those old directors I knew were judged virtually unemployable. Just about everybody I met was at the end of their careers and I felt tremendously in debt to all of them. And I wanted to return the favor. It got to be so ridiculous that even a good critic like Vincent Canby said in his review of Paper Moon that it was my homage to Shirley Temple!"Bogdanovich explained incredulously, "When people asked me why I shot The Last Picture Show in black and white and I said Orson Welles told me to, they really thought I meant that! Orson certainly encouraged the idea, but I can't say I did it because he told me to… that whole way of looking at my stuff was confused by my genuine admiration for the older directors. And why shouldn't I say so? They'd created the art form, and the industry, after all."

Now maybe Bogdanovich didn't do overt John Ford homages in the two films people insinuate he did, like he did with Hawks or DePalma did with Hitchcock, but that doesn't mean he didn't want to. Originally, The Last Picture Show author Larry McMurtry had an idea for a big cattle drive movie, that after the success of their Last collaboration they could do together. Peter loved the material and wanted to do it with John Ford's three biggest leading men: John Wayne, James Stewart and Henry Fonda. Fonda, whose career was at a low ebb all through the seventies, liked the idea. But neither Wayne nor Stewart responded to the material. And since neither man could be persuaded to come aboard, Bogdanovich put the project on the shelf.Years later McMurtry bought back the rites to the material and turned it into the Pulitzer prize-winning novel Lonesome Dove, which was later turned into a massively successful mini-series in the eighties. It starred Robert Duvall in the James Stewart role, Tommy Lee Jones in the John Wayne role, and I suppose Robert Urich in the Henry Fonda role. Now, this is a clear case of Bogdanovich being blinded by his Ford admiration. And, frankly, one can only be grateful it fell apart, since (no doubt) Cybill Shepherd would have played the Diane Lane role. Imagine the scene in the mini-series where Duvall and Lane talking about 'pokin' with a Cheyenne Social Club-era Jimmy Stewart! No wonder Stewart turned it down. Bogdanovich might have been suffering from Ford dementia but, apparently, Jimmy Stewart wasn't.When Peter had his hands on material like Lonesome Dove, he put it on the shelf rather than cast it correctly? How about Steve McQueen in the Jones role, Warren Oates in the Duvall role and Jeff Bridges in the Urich role? Or Gene Hackman in the Jones role, James Coburn in the Duvall role and Joe Don Baker in the Urich role? Or McQueen, Coburn and David Carradine? All western icons, all age-appropriate and all better casting then Peter's over-the-hill gang.

WANG YU: SUPERSTAR! SUPER DIRECTOR!

Before Bruce Lee's meteoric rise, the biggest martial arts star in Hong Kong cinema was Wang Yu, amusingly known in the U.S. as Jimmy Wang Yu (Which admittedly is much more fun to say). In the Japanese film industry they had legit masculine male action stars. But in the fifties and sixties the Hong Kong film industry didn't really have an equivalent to Toshiro Mifune, or Ken Takakura, or Shintaro Katsu, or a dozen others.That was until 1967, when Wang Yu starred in The Shaw Brothers production The One Armed Swordsman ("Du bei dao"), directed by both the John Ford & Sergio Leone of Martial Arts films, Chang Cheh. Like a lot of Hollywood films of the forties and fifties, most of the films coming out of Hong Kong were aimed towards women. Before Wang Yu, the biggest star of Hong Kong movies was actress Ivy Ling Po, who was so popular she played both female and male roles (Brigitte Lin would do this in the nineties). Audiences would rather watch Ivy Ling Po play a boy, than watch an actual boy.

But The One Armed Swordsman represented the same seismic quake in the Hong Kong film industry that Sergio Leone's Fistful of Dollars did in the Italian film industry.All the other films that we now refer to as Martial Arts cinema sprang from the success of The One Armed Swordsman. It was the first Hong Kong film to make over a million dollars at the box office. It made Wang Yu the biggest movie star in Hong Kong, and in many Asian territories. And it turned Chang Cheh into The Million Dollar Director.

What made Chang Cheh's movie so different, was how masculine themed and bloody it was. It owed more to violent Japanese samurai films than the feminine oriented Peking Opera style Hong Kong movies made up to that point. Nor did the sword fights have a balletic dance inspired quality. They were hacking slashing affairs, that cut limbs asunder (like the mutilated title hero), and when characters were sliced with razor sharp blades, their technicolor red blood sprayed from one end of the set to the other.

But most of all, it was brooding handsome Wang Yu at its center. Not an old man favorite that audiences had grown up with (Kwan Tak-hing), not a favorite actress masquerading as a young boy (Ivy Ling Po). But a handsome male movie star out for vengeance. The success of the picture would make Wang Yu & Chang Cheh the first action star/director team in the industry. They followed up their smash with one classic hit for Shaw Brothers Studios after another, Assassin, The Return of the One Armed Swordsman, The Sword of Swords & The Golden Swallow. Wang

Yu's success reached its peak when he traveled to Japan and starred opposite Japanese superstar Shintaro Katsu as Zatoichi the Blind Swordsman in the first Japanese-Hong Kong crossover film Zatoichi Meets His Equal.

Now while Wang Yu may of been the biggest movie star in Hong Kong, he still worked for Run Run Shaw. Shaw Brothers didn't mind making movie stars out of people, but it did mind paying them. Similar to how Herbert J. Yates skinflint studio head of Republic Pictures felt about paying its matinee idol Gower Gulch Cowboy Stars. So Wang Yu took a page out of Gene Autry's playbook. Once Autry became the number one Saturday matinee singing cowboy, he left Republic Pictures to make his own movies. So, too, did Wang Yu jump ship at Shaw Brothers, moving over to rival studios like Taiwan's First Films & Union Film Company (which also produced A Touch of Zen & Dragon Gate Inn), and Raymond Chow's Golden Harvest Studios.Chang Cheh was so angry with him for breaking up their partnership that he privately vowed to destroy Wang Yu by making David Chang an even bigger star than his former leading man. Similar to what Herbert J. Yates tried to do to Gene Autry when he found Leonard Slye and turned him into Roy Rogers. Cheh even went so far as remaking The One Armed Swordsman with David Chang, and titling it The NEW One Armed Swordsman, and giving interviews to the press praising David Chang and damning Wang Yu. While David Chang made a lot of good movies with Chang Cheh, Vengeance, Duel Of The Iron Fist, Have Sword Will Travel, the One Armed Swordsman remake, David Chang is no Roy Rogers or Wang Yu. It wouldn't be till Cheh started making movies with Fu Shen (aka Alexander Fu Shen) that he found a true Wang Yu replacement (like Bruce Lee, Fu Shen would tragically die before his time).

Wang Yu leaving Shaw Brothers also coincided with him beginning to direct his own pictures. And as a director, Wang Yu was one of the greatest and most innovative filmmakers in the history of martial arts movies. The last film he did for Shaw Brothers was his first film as director, and it proved to be even more historic in the development of the genre than even The One Armed Swordsman.The Chinese Boxer (aka Long hu dou) is the first of Wang Yu's four directed Kung Fu film masterpieces. It was released in Hong Kong in 1970, and was one of the most dynamic movies to come out of Asia that year. Only Kenji Misumi's Baby Cart at the River Styx (US title: Shogun Assassin) ever so slightly gives it a haircut. While Chang Cheh's film ushered in a whole wave of action movies out of Hong Kong and Taiwan, they all dealt with Wuxia sword fighting. The Chinese Boxer was the first film of the genre to have the hero eschew blades for fists. And from that day, forward the Kung Fu fighting film was born.Later the hero taking on an entire room full of ruffians, whether it be in a tea house, casino or dojo, would become as

much of a staple of the genre as the western bar room brawl, or the fast draw showdown. But Wang Yu's cinematic first barehanded casino fight in The Chinese Boxer was never bettered. Only Bruce Lee's destruction of the Japanese karate school in Fist of Fury can compete, and even then, it's more Lee's ability than the filmmaking (though Lo Wei was a much finer filmmaker then either Lee or critics want to give him credit for).

Shaw Brothers sued Wang Yu for breaking his contract and won a highly publicized court case with the end result being Wang Yu could no longer make movies in Hong Kong. Necessitating a move to Taiwan. His first film after leaving Shaw Brothers and setting up shop in Taiwan was his second film as a director. The Brave and the Evil proved both that The Chinese Boxer was no fluke, and Wang Yu knew how to make a Wang Yu movie better than anybody else. The film teamed him up with legendary Taiwanese female fighting star Polly Shang-Kwan (star of King Hu's Dragon Gate Inn), and the two make a dynamic team. Like Clint Eastwood & Sylvester Stallone, Wang Yu was the best director Wang Yu ever worked with. Along with Chang Cheh, Sun Chung (the Kubrick of Shaw Brothers), and the Taiwan Master Blaster Lee Tso Nam, Wang Yu was the greatest filmmaker of the old school Kung Fu film era (with Way of the Dragon, Bruce Lee proved he was a talentless filmmaker). Like Jacky Chan would do later, Wang Yu had a penchant for outrageous, visually stimulating fight scenes that continued to top themselves throughout the picture.

But none of the above directors had the visual commitment to their pictures that Wang Yu had (as an actor he was a true Chinese hero, but as a director his influence came from Japan). The fight in the falling snow against the two samurais in The Chinese Boxer, the nighttime climatic fight in The Brave and the Evil that turns into day, the wet fight in the castle moat during the killing blow of the same movie, the nighttime torchlit battle sequence on the beach in Beach of the War Gods. Like Eastwood, Wang Yu understood the genre he was making movies in better than most, and he understood his own persona better than anybody.

Using Taiwan as a new home base, all through the seventies, Wang Yu starred in a string of bloody, skull crushing, bone snapping action flicks. Furious Slaughter, The Last Duel, Invincible Sword and Dragon Squad (which is sort of Wang Yu's Three the Hard Way). The totally bananas Knight Errant, which was released in America as Kung Fu Mama because Wang Yu's opponent is an invincible chubby old lady. And the amazing Blood of The Dragon, which has two big distinctions. One, it's one of the most violent movies ever made. It's about ninety minutes long and the last hour is Wang Yu waging a bloody one man war against a whole army,

armed only with a long silver spear. And two, this violent bloodbath was directed by Kao Pao-Shu, the only woman directing films in this genre (we had a Kao Pao-Shu retrospective at The New Beverly last May).

When Wang Yu moved over to Golden Harvest, he did two savage and pitiless action films with Lo Wei, the director that made Bruce Lee a star with The Big Boss & Fists Of Fury.The two Lo Wei films are The Tattooed Dragon & A Man Called Tiger (see review for A Man Called Tiger on this review page). Tiger was supposed to be the third of Lo Wei's films with Bruce Lee. Some say Lee passed on the film to direct his first film Way of the Dragon (US title: Return of the Dragon). Lo Wei says different, claiming it was he who passed on Lee in favor of Wang Yu. I find it hard to believe if Bruce Lee wanted to do it, Golden Harvest refusing him anything. But for sure Wang Yu was the better casting. Which goes to the change in Wang Yu's persona once he left Shaw Brothers behind.All in all, while at Shaw Brothers, Wang Yu played more heroically pious type characters. It was Shaw Brothers stalwart Lo Leigh that played the more rascally types. But once leaving Shaw Brothers, Wang Yu, more often than not, played cocky, shit talkin', violent sons-a-bitches. Like in A Man Called Tiger, he doesn't pretend to be a gangster to infiltrate the crime organization that killed his father. He becomes a violent sadistic gangster. Sometimes, in some movies, to such a degree, you almost feel sorry for the bad guys. And it was during this time he was known in the public as The Steve McQueen of Asia.

His three other masterpieces of the martial arts genre are, Beach of the War Gods, The One Armed Boxer, & The Master of the Flying Guillotine.Beach of the War Gods (the movie in the U.K. that Wang Yu is most known for) is Wang Yu's biggest budget, most impressive looking epic. It tells the story of a sleepy coastal hamlet in China named Sho-lay. A four-man emissary for the Japanese army arrives in their small fishing village, and tells the town folk that a Japanese force is coming in ten days time. Their intention is to conquer China, with Sho-lay their first stop. The Japanese intend to march through China, conquering it one village at a time.And they expect the conquered villages to finance their campaign of conquest.The fishing village is given an ultimatum. They have ten days before the Japanese army arrives in full force. When they do the village must pay them twenty thousand tails of silver. If the payment isn't forthcoming the Japanese will slaughter every man, woman, and child in Sho-lay. The terrified fishermen can't believe the impossibility of the amount of the pavement, nor can they comprehend the cruelty of the approaching army. But a mysterious wandering swordsman (Wang Yu, naturally) confronts the four man emissary with Wang Yu's cocky brand of anti-Japanese shit talk, and slaughters them where they stand. Wang Yu then

impresses upon the villagers that they must give him money, so he can go out and recruit some fighters to combat the Japanese army once they arrive on the beach. Not just to save Sho-lay, but China itself.

The film is a wonderful pulpy combination of both The Seven Samurai and the story of the Three hundred Spartans (Zach Snyder's "300" plays like a remake of Beach of the War Gods). Cinematically it's Wang Yu's most Kurosawa inspired film, made arrogantly amusing by all the rabid anti-Japanese sentiment. One of the deadly killers Wang Yu recruits responds to his offer by saying, "Normally I get paid for killing, but I figure I can kill a few Japs' for free." Another gregariously says, "Kill Japs', why didn't you say so!"Japanese villains were a staple of Chinese, Hong Kong, Korean, and Filipino cinema of the time. I

n the film The Screaming Tiger Wang Yu wants revenge against the Japanese for slaughtering everybody in the Chinese fishing village he comes from. So he goes to Japan to kill every Japanese he meets. The whole heroic point of Lo Wei's Fist of Fury is Bruce Lee proving that "The Chinese are no longer the sick men of Asia" by single handedly defeating the Japanese karate school, and a good portion of the occupying army. Same thing with director Hung Feng's show stoppers Hap-ki-do (US title: Lady Kung Fu) & When Taekwondo Strikes (US title: Sting of the Dragon Masters) where Hong Kong's petite fireball Angela Mao Ying is joined by Taekwondo Master Jhoon Rhee to defeat the Japanese, or as a title of a Chang Cheh movie describes it, "Heroes defeating Japs'".

Wang Yu's magnificent climatic battle on the beach of the war gods, at night, lit by torchlight, takes up the whole second half of the picture. It's the most cinematically impressive large-scale battle sequence in all of Hong Kong seventies martial arts cinema. But that seems too much like a qualification, it's just a fucking great battle scene. It blows Orson Wells overrated battle sequence in Falstaff Chimes at Midnight right off the screen. The end fight between the Chinese bandit rascals and the Japanese warriors, dressed in full military armor regalia, is so good, and takes up so much of the films running time, that the movie starts feeling less like a martial arts film, and more like a historical war picture along the lines of Seven Samurai, Braveheart, or Kingdom of Heaven.

His other two classics, The One Armed Boxer, and its sequel Master of the Flying Guillotine are the two films that Wang Yu is most known for in the United States. Especially among the enthusiastic black audiences that kept the genre alive in cinemas long after the mainstream audience had moved on to a new fad (Car Chase movies, Good Ol' Boy movies, Vigilante movies, Star Wars-Jaws-Alien rip offs).

These movies were Wang Yu's attempt to take the character that made him famous, and adapt him to the martial arts audience. Yet, as opposed to the classic heroic chivalry nature of the One Armed Swordsman movies, the One Armed Boxer movies are comic book inspired gonzo extravaganzas, filled with super powered superheroes fighting an array of super powered super villains that engage in battle royals that seem orchestrated by Jack Kirby himself.

I'm not just making that comparison now. I used to say that back then.

In the seventies these movies were the closest equivalent to the Mighty Marvel Universe that cinema had to offer. The names and the super powers of the villains in The One Armed Boxer (The Kung Fu Beast, The Karate Killer, The Siamese Devils, The Tibetan Tiger Men, The Bloody Kwon-Do Master, The Judo King and The Invincible Yuga Kahn), all sound like an Asian themed line-up of a whole years worth of Fantastic Four foes.

The One Armed Boxer (as The Chinese Professionals) was released in America at the height of the Kung Fu craze in 1973 by National General Pictures and did okay, but it was surrounded by dozens of other Hong Kong exports fighting for theatre space (including Chang Cheh's The New One Armed Swordsman under the title Triple Irons and Wang Yu's The Chinese Boxer under the title Hammer Of God). But Master of the Flying Guillotine released way late in cycle, 1977, topped the Variety chart when first released. And it played for years on the Grindhouse circuit. Along with Lee Tso Nam's Bruce Li vehicle, Exit The Dragon, Enter The Tiger, I saw Wang Yu's film at more theatrical engagements than any other chopsocky flick.

Twice at The Carson Twin Cinema (where I saw most of the movies that later film critics would say ruined my esthetics), and on three different triple features, one at The World Theatre, the main exploitation house in Hollywood located on Hollywood Blvd by Gower, and at The Los Angeles Theatre in Downtown LA on Broadway's theatre row (with Ms.45 and Good Guys Wear Black), and at The Palace in Long Beach (which hardly a palace and barely a theatre, and the triple feature was The Howling, Rolling Thunder, and Flying Guillotine).

Then KTLA Channel 5 got the film and played it on The Channel Five Movie Theatre throughout the first half of the eighties, where I taped it off of television on VHS and watched it whenever I wanted.Master of the Flying Guillotine isn't the accomplished film that either The Chinese Boxer or Beach of the War God is. Even when compared to The One Arm Boxer, the sequel seems slight, like it's barely a

movie. There's hardly any story, and what story it does have is barely dramatized. The incident that sets the story in motion, The One Arm Boxer kills the two disciples of Fu Sheng Wu Chi (a blind Tibetan monk, and the flying guillotine master), happens off screen before the movie starts (It's the two Tibetan Tiger Men from the first movie).

It may be hard to make a case that The Master of the Flying Guillotine is a good movie.But if you like this sort of thing, it's easy to make the case it's a great Kung Fu movie.I've loved this movie since I was a child, and the older I've got, the more my affection grows.

For the uninitiated it might seem like dumb crazy ass shit (for instance if I were to try to get Peter Bogdanovich into martial art movies, I wouldn't start with Master of The Flying Guillotine). But for a martial art film expert, and Wang Yu fan, it's like a fine vintage wine only a connoisseur can appreciate.